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No. 183

A SELF-DENYING ORDINANCE

When the game began between them for a jest,
He played king and she played queen to match the best ;
Laughter soft as tears, and tears that turned to laughter,
These were things she sought for years and sorrowed after.

.
What the years mean ; how time dies and is not slain ;
How love laughs and cries and wanes again ;
These were things she came to know, and take their measure,
When the game was played out so for one man's pleasure.

SWINBURNE.

A SELF-DENYING ORDINANCE

BY
M. HAMILTON

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NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1895

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A SELF-DENYING ORDINANCE.

CHAPTER I.

"You bells in the steeple, ring, ring out your changes
How many soever they be,
And let the brown meadow-lark's note, as he ranges,
Come over, come over to me.

"Poor bells ! I forgive you ; your good days are over,
And mine, they are yet to be ;
No listening, no longing shall aught, aught discover ;
You leave the story to me."

"It was very impressive," said Miss Chester, "to meet the latest Bond Street manner in the middle of the bog road."

"If you are talking of Sir Nicholas Osborne, *don't*," said Joanna. "There are two things I have no patience to talk about : he's one, and the other is—Zenana meetings."

"Which reminds me—why do I find you tramping the streets this fine afternoon, instead of working for the little blacks ?" said Miss Chester. She was a plump, self-satisfied little person, not in her first youth. It gave her a considerable amount of satisfaction to associate on equal terms with a very young girl like Joanna Conway.

"I just couldn't stand any more this afternoon," said Joanna, with hot indignation. "It was quite trouble enough to have to sit up at night, with locked doors, to bone and cut down a whole petticoat bodice, just because my mother won't let me dress like other girls——"

"I honour you for having enough vanity to make you take so much trouble," said Miss Chester, with conviction ; "especially as I know it takes you about half an hour to hem a seam an inch long."

Joanna went on unheedingly : "And then, at the last minute—just because I forgot to turn the key in the door when I was dressing—to be caught, and have had all my trouble for nothing. Oh, it is too bad ! And then to be expected to give in and smile, and go down to that—that——"

"Don't mind me, Joanna," said Miss Chester, with a sweet smile.

"Well, *that* Zenana meeting," said Joanna. "Edith, I don't believe an angel could have stood it—nor a *worm*," she added, as an evident climax. "Did you ever see such a bundle as I look? And, yet, I don't believe I have *really* a worse figure than other people."

Certainly Joanna's figure was not, as yet, everything that could be desired.

"Assert yourself, my dear, assert yourself," said Miss Chester.

Joanna sighed.

"It is all very well for you to say that, when you've got an obedient, *modern* father and mother. I'm *glad* I struck to-day, though I know I shall never hear the last of it for weeks, months, perhaps years. I feel that I am awfully like Miss Jellyby, only that there is no dancing master for me to marry. We are going to work for a mission to the Jews next week, and, upon my word, I wish I was a Jew, for I haven't a decent dress to put on."

"Positively, your wrongs make you eloquent," said Miss Chester; "but let us no longer interrupt the traffic of this city by standing in the middle of the road. Come to McCracken's with me; I want to see if they have a railway guide for this month. The trains are generally altered in May, aren't they?"

"Fancy asking *me* about trains," said Joanna. "You lucky girl! I suppose you are going off to that dance in Belfast?"

"Yes, I think I shall go with the Lawsons. We are to stay at the Royal Avenue Hotel for the night, and I shall come back next day. I wish you could go, Joanna."

"Oh!" was all Joanna said, drawing a long breath.

"But, after all, you are not so badly off. You have got your bees, your carving, and a thousand other fads,—not to speak of Zenana meetings,—while I should absolutely die of boredom if I stayed long in this dull hole."

"Yes," said Joanna; "but it does drive me wild sometimes to have to do exactly the same things every day of my life. I am called every day at the same time in the morning, and I dress myself in the same clothes, and see the same people; and, for all I can see, I may go on in the same way forever—till I grow old and gray, and am quite content, and have never *lived* a single day. If only something would happen—even something bad!"

"You have certainly got a fit of the blues to-day," said Miss Chester, staring at her. "Here we are at McCracken's, and I am rather glad, as you aren't amusing."

McCracken's was the grand shop in Ballylone. It stood at the end of the principal street,—for there were two,—and looked down upon its rivals from a height of superiority. Besides, the McCrackens were church people, and the only other shops with any pretension to size belonged to Presbyterians and Roman Catholics.

McCracken's could supply the wants of anyone who was not unduly particular. There were two large windows which displayed the glories of the establishment, being filled with china, sweet stuff, millinery, articles of apparel, and many other things. Inside were shelves, stored with a less prominent assortment of goods, and on the floor a pile of carpeting and another of print stuff. A row of mugs, with "A Present from Ballylone" inscribed upon them, and a barrel of herrings were the background of the picture. But there was plenty of room in the shop, and it is impossible to say why Joanna always managed to rub her dress against the herring barrel.

Mrs. McCracken had been parlour maid to the Conways ten or eleven years before, and she had adored Joanna ever since. She was a stout, motherly person, with a large family of all ages. She very often sat in the shop "for company," but she had not much to do with it.

"Good-evening, Miss Joanna: good-evening, Miss Chester," she said. "I didn't expect to see you the day, Miss Joanna; I thought you'd have been at the sewing meeting. You'll come to the room and lain down, and have a cup of tea? You haven't been to see me these three days."

"I'll have some tea, at any rate," said Miss Chester, who had not been asked. "Have you a time-table for this month, Mrs. McCracken?"

"I am sorry we haven't, Miss Chester; but our Roddy will be going past the station with the cart to-morrow, and I'll tell him to get one, if that will do. You are not going to leave us again so soon, Miss Chester, are you?"

Across her own threshold Mrs. McCracken was hospitable even to Miss Chester, of whom she highly disapproved. If Joanna only had been there, she might have been allowed to have tea in the kitchen, which she liked very much better, but as it was they were conducted in state to "the room." This was a small apartment with lace-curtained windows, which looked on the street and were apparently never opened; a set of horse-hair chairs, adorned with antimacassars and ranged at regular intervals round the walls, and a table, adorned with three crochet mats, supporting respectively a Bible, a vase of artificial flowers, and a photograph book.

As the family bedrooms all opened off "the room" Mrs. McCracken had to go round and hastily shut the doors before she was ready for conversation.

"I hear you are going to have the new clergyman as a lodger till the Rectory is ready, Mrs. McCracken?" said Miss Chester suavely, and Joanna smiled to herself as the motive for their visit dawned upon her.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. McCracken, much gratified, "the young gentleman is to have the upstairs rooms—a bedroom and a parlour; perhaps you would like to see them when you have finished your tea?"

"I should, immensely," said Miss Chester graciously; "he is sure to be comfortable with you, Mrs. McCracken."

Joanna escaped to the kitchen with the baby as an excuse, and she did not come back till tea was ready, but Miss Chester had not the same chance of getting a breath of fresh air.

"Will you want Roddy up to wait on Friday, Miss Joanna?" said Mrs. McCracken, as she began to pour out the tea.

"I don't know, I am sure," said Joanna. "Don't you think it is horribly rude, Edith? Mother asked Sir Nicholas Osborne to dinner next Friday, more than a fortnight ago, and he has never taken the trouble to answer."

"Sir Nicholas Osborne—oh, do you know him?" said Miss Chester, with much interest.

"I don't know him, and I don't want to know him, if that is the way he behaves," said Joanna.

"You must excuse my saying it, my dear girl, but you know he would be bored to death. What delicious bread, Mrs. McCracken; do you make it yourself?"

"Of course he would be bored," Joanna agreed, "but don't you think he might take the trouble to decline?"

"Well, how *could* he say that he had a previous engagement in Ballylone? I must stand up for him, Joanna, for I met him in the middle of the bog road the other day, and he is very good-looking. He stared at me so that I did not know what to do, and he spoke to a man who was breaking stones a minute later; I am sure he asked him who I was."

Joanna was not much impressed by this recital; she had been so often told that men were staring at Miss Chester when she herself could not see it.

"Sir Nicholas comes in here every morning about eleven, to get the paper," said Mrs. McCracken. "I would be glad to send it up, but I think he likes the walk. He is a nice young gentleman, and he must find it very lonely."

"There, Joanna, there's mystery and excitement quite ready for you," said Miss Chester. "Find out what on earth Sir Nicholas is doing here, and why he left the Guards."

"Thank you; that is much more in your line. No more tea, thank you, Mrs. McCracken." *

"He has got considerably more swagger than he will find a use for in Ballylone," said Miss Chester, laughing.

"Well," said Joanna, "if he thinks himself too good for us, I am sure I don't care."

"I hope he will return papa's call," said Miss Chester.

And then, tea being over, they were taken upstairs, where Mrs. McCracken proudly displayed to them the future rooms of the Rev. Mr. Jellett.

"Poor young man!" said Miss Chester, when they were once more in the street. "I do hope he will succeed in getting a window open, and that he will be careful of those stairs."

"His life won't be exactly a bed of roses," said Joanna; "at least I am afraid not. He is exactly the kind of young man who will want to agree with everybody."

"Then, unless he is a consummate hypocrite, he shouldn't have come here," said Miss Chester trenchantly.

CHAPTER II.

*"La jeunesse en riant m'apporta ses mensonges,
Son avenir de gloire, et d'amour, et d'orgueil."*

THE Conways lived at Cliff House, which was ten minutes' walk from the village, a walk going down hill all the way, and which Joanna still liked to take at a racing pace.

The house was not large and was extremely ugly; there was a fair garden, and in his spare moments Mr. Conway farmed the land round, which was consequently not exactly picturesque. The avenue ran between a ploughed field and a hay-field, and the farm buildings came inconveniently near the front of the house.

Mr. Conway was a solicitor, with a business so old and well established that it had gained him admission to the scattered county houses within reach, till he had fallen in love with the pretty face of a neighbouring doctor's daughter. Mrs. Conway could not consort with the county; she supported her claim to equality with a vehemence which showed her doubts on the subject, she looked out for slights with a perseverance which could not fail to be rewarded, and she lived on an altitude of virtue to which her neighbors might not have objected, had she not insisted on forcing them up too.

Consequently she quarrelled in turn with all the families about, and as neither she nor her husband was particularly interesting or desirable in any way, nobody made much effort to renew their acquaintance.

Mr. Conway was by no means a rich man, contriving to expend quite a remarkable amount of money on his farm without any return. He bought new-fangled ploughs and reaping machines, which his men entirely refused to use; he

invested in a churn for saving labour, whereupon the dairy-maid gave instant warning, and in an extremely intricate and hideous stove for the hall, which was to save the forty pounds it had cost in the course of a couple of years, but, instead, smoked the family out of the house till it was removed.

With all these failures only Joanna sympathised, and she did not even grumble when persuaded to invest in an infallible bee-hive, which turned out an utter failure. It gave her an idea, she said, and she set to work and put together a hive on somewhat the same lines which answered admirably. She would have tried to make something out of the stove, if she had been allowed.

But, except in these matters, it was Mrs. Conway who ruled the house. There had been a time when Mr. Conway had made a struggle not to yield, but he was a man who liked to be comfortable and hated nagging, and he gave way very soon, saw as little of his wife as possible, and cherished for her a dislike which made her presence a constant irritation to him.

They had two daughters, Joanna and a sister who was eight years older. There had been a son, who was drowned as a boy, for whom Mrs. Conway grieved always, and for whom she would have had everybody else grieve always too. Joanna, at eight years old, had cried for him very heartily, and missed him very much, but she had been ready to laugh again very soon. She had only a half resentful memory of her brother Edwin now, connected with gloom, reproof, punishment, and an ideal of virtue held before her which did not at all agree with her recollection of him.

In the middle of this gloom Elizabeth Conway grew up to be a very pretty girl. There was a garrison then about eight miles off, and the country generally was much gayer. But Mrs. Conway did not approve of dancing and frivolous amusement, she looked upon officers as dangerous and unredeemable libertines, and Elizabeth stayed at home and went to prayer-meetings and sewing classes.

Consequently people began to see her on the roads and in the fields with a certain mad-cap young lieutenant called Morris.

Elizabeth was absolutely ignorant ; she had never even read a novel, except an occasional cheap story which she had borrowed under the rose from the servants, and she found living a novel of her own much more exciting. She had neither interests nor pursuits, and she was as silly as she was pretty ; she began to give young Morris rendezvous at all hours, to the great scandal of the neighbourhood. Everybody knew except Mr. and Mrs. Conway, everybody talked about it, and nobody liked to tell the mother who treated her daughter so hardly.

One day everything was found out ; the neighbourhood

never knew how, nor exactly how much there was to find out. There was a marriage, and Elizabeth left Ballylone without a regret. She made the most of her freedom ; she went everywhere, enjoyed everything, was admired, lost her head, and got desperately into debt.

A few years later she brought an undefended divorce case against her husband, and gained it with costs which neither of them had any money to pay.

Mr. Morris got his company and went to India, and Elizabeth and her little girl came back to Ballylone.

Over this, for the first time for years, Mr. Conway asserted himself.

"We have no right to throw a stain upon Elizabeth by our refusal to receive her," he said, "and besides, if we don't, as far as I can see, she must go to the workhouse. I say she *shall* come here."

She had come, but during the five years that had followed Mrs. Conway had never once spoken to her daughter. She sat opposite her at meals three times a day, they spent evening after evening in the same room, and in a small house they naturally met at every turn, but the silence had never been broken.

She talked *at* her often enough, and she prayed for her, as she frequently informed her through Joanna, but then she always promised to pray for any member of her family with whom she felt for the time particularly displeased.

She undertook the training of Elizabeth's little Polly, and Elizabeth, who lived in abject terror of her mother, did not dare to interfere. She sat a good deal in her own room, and began to imagine herself an invalid.

Joanna was very different. Five years ago, when Mr. Conway had roused himself to have Elizabeth admitted to her home, he had also awakened to the fact of Joanna's existence, and this had resulted in her going to school near Dublin for a couple of years. Joanna was naturally inclined to be happy, and she had enjoyed herself very much, but, being behind other girls of her age when she went to school, she was still behind them when she left.

However, she had carved the side of her desk really wonderfully well with her pocket knife, and had spent all her spare moments in various exceedingly neat bits of carpentering ; Joanna could do almost anything with her hands.

She was a tall, slight girl, rather angular and awkward ; she had a pair of very earnest brown eyes, and soft wavy hair, but she was not pretty ; a fact of which she was perfectly conscious, and which troubled her a little.

When she left school and returned to her life at Ballylone it was with a definite object before her, which kept her from

feeling any dullness for some time. What she purposed for herself was to make some money, enough to support her in London, or even in Dublin, where she would take carving lessons, and in time be able to make her own living. Then possibly she might marry well, but she did not think this so likely, though she had quite made up her mind that if any particularly desirable individual were to forget the fact of her plainness she would not say him nay. Joanna's ideas on the marriage state were grandly vague and pronouncedly mercenary.

The first step was evidently to make some money, and this she set about with much earnestness. She started bees, and sold swarms and honey; she set on foot a small hen yard of her own, and as she grew richer, she began to go in for various select breeds; she carried on a traffic in flowers through the Exchange and Mart, and finally she bought a field from her father on the most commercial principles, and started herself as a farmer.

With all these irons in the fire she had not much time for boredom, till suddenly, at the beginning of the third year, she awakened to the fact that she had only made twelve pounds so far, that her field had been a source of loss rather than gain, and that, at this rate, she would be an old woman before she could realise her dreams.

It was then that she began to be discontented, to feel the depressing atmosphere of her home, and to rebel against her mother's imperious will. Joanna was less in fear of Mrs. Conway than anyone else in the house, and for that reason, perhaps, her mother bore more from her.

But the household was not a cheerful one, neither were the surroundings at Ballylone very enlivening. Except at Cliff House there was nobody young near Ballylone but Miss Chester, and for her Joanna had a friendly feeling not unmingled with contempt. Then she was very seldom at home, and as Ballylone contained nothing in the shape of a young man, she was always desperately bored when she was there. Besides, though she did her best to forget it, Edith Chester was a contemporary, not of Joanna, but of Elizabeth, and Joanna was secretly of opinion that it was quite time she should settle down in life, which, according to her own account, she had had innumerable opportunities of doing.

Ballylone was a very small village, and had made itself the centre for a select assortment of old ladies, who were very well content with life, and found quite sufficient excitement in prayer-meetings, visiting each other, and frequent disagreements. It was the fear of Joanna's life that she should one day become one of the band, but as yet there certainly seemed no cause to anticipate her settling down too contentedly to her lot.

CHAPTER III.

"Those inferior duties of life which the French call *les petites morales*, or the smaller morals, are with us considered by the name of good manners."

"GOOD HEAVENS, John, what on earth am I to do? Sir Nicholas Osborne has accepted."

Mr. Conway, having been disturbed in the process of sitting over the fire and thinking out his latest hobby in farm improvements when he was supposed to be answering his clients' letters, was proportionably disposed to be cross. His wife very seldom penetrated to his office in Ballylone, and as it was a cold morning he had lighted a fire, which he knew she would look upon as a culpable extravagance. All fires in the daytime went out on the 1st of May at Cliff House.

"Sir Nicholas has accepted?" he said, with a calmness which he knew to be the most successful way of irritating his wife, "why, isn't that the very thing you wanted?"

"The very thing I wanted! How can you be so stupid—and what you want with a fire to-day I cannot imagine. I explained the whole thing to you yesterday, and you agreed that we had better ask Mr. Moreland, and now he's accepted too. When a young man has had nearly three weeks' invitation to a dinner party, and doesn't answer till the day before, you naturally don't expect him to accept."

Mr. Conway got up, and with apparent carelessness got between his wife and the fire.

"If you will remember, Marion," he said, "I told you from the beginning that it was absurd to ask a young fellow like that to a country dinner-party. You have given him an opportunity to show how little he troubles himself to be civil, and you don't imagine he wants to come?"

"I don't see any reason why he should not want to come," said Mrs. Conway indignantly, "and he does, very much. He says: 'I shall be *very* glad to accept your *kind* invitation for Friday the 9th, and I am *ashamed* of myself for not having written sooner.' There!"

"The italics are your own, I suppose?" inquired her husband.

"And as for not asking him when we are giving a dinner-party, I don't see how I could have avoided it, considering you have so much to say to him in a business way. Really, John, you cannot want a hot fire on a day like this, and it is a sin to waste money when there are so many around us who need it. If you will move to one side and give me the tongs, I will take off some of the turf."

Mr. Conway yielded, but not with a good grace.

"Don't try and persuade me, Marion, that you gave this thing for any other reason than that you wanted to ask Sir Nicholas Osborne. Well, you've asked him, and it seems he's coming; so having destroyed the fire and made me thoroughly uncomfortable, can't you leave me in peace?"

"It is not in the least cold," said Mrs. Conway, who had walked very rapidly down from Cliff House and had all her outdoor things on, "and you won't see my difficulty; as both Dr. Moreland and Sir Nicholas Osborne are coming, there will be a man too many. What is to be done?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Mr. Conway calmly.

"Don't sit there, looking as if you didn't care, John. You are the most selfish man I ever met. Try and think of other people for once, and give me some advice."

"Leave it to Providence. Perhaps the Lord will provide," said Mr. Conway. The sight of his scattered fire made him vicious, but Mrs. Conway was too full of her subject to take any notice of his remark, other than a shocked look and an eloquent pause.

"You see I can't ask anyone on such a short invitation, can I?" she said.

"No, of course not," her husband assented.

"How absurd you are! I am sure that horrid Miss Chester will be only too delighted to come, if I ask her."

"Then ask her by all means," said Mr. Conway promptly; he had rather a weakness for Miss Chester, who amused him.

"But then if I ask her," Mrs. Conway pursued in a troubled tone, "I must add to the table again, and if I do that, I don't see how the servants are to get round by the window."

Mr. Conway shook his head. "So that won't do," he said. "Supposing you tell Sir Nicholas that you have filled up his place? I assure you he won't mind."

"You know I can't do that," said Mrs. Conway, with much irritation. "It is all very well for you, who have nothing to worry you. Then I told Roddy I should not want him to come up and wait, and now he is sure not to be able to come. And that old yellow silk of Joanna's is so faded, and there is no time to get another."

"Do you think we could possibly manage to get the drawing-room chairs re-covered in time, or new curtains for the dining-room?" suggested Mr. Conway, with fine sarcasm. "If I were you, my good Marion, I would not be in too great haste to throw myself at this young man's head. It seems to me that the county are not in any burning hurry to take him up, and it is certainly rather odd that a young man should leave the Guards and come to bury himself in a place like this."

"How can you be so absurd, John?" said Mrs. Conway sharply. "He has come to look after his property, of course."

"Just tell me, did he, or his father or grandfather before him, ever come to this part of the world before? I should say his 'property' here brings him in almost sixteen pounds a year, and if this is an item in his income sufficiently important to warrant looking after for six months, I don't wonder he found the Guards rather expensive."

"It is most unchristian to take away the poor young man's character in this way. I am sure, if you have anything really against him, I am the very last person who would have anything to say to him," said Mrs. Conway.

"I am quite sure of that," agreed her husband, with emphasis, "but I have nothing to say, except that, if you stay here much longer, I shall be ready to take away the character of my whole acquaintance. I assure you I will make full inquiries when he comes to me for Joanna's hand, and perhaps that will be soon enough."

"If you are worldly yourself, John," said Mrs. Conway severely, "you need not imagine everyone is like you. For me, I know my sole wish is to see my child married to a good, Christian young man. Try and control your irritable temper, John; it is my constant prayer for you. Think that I have been worrying over this since breakfast, and if I try to consult you for five minutes you get cross. It's all very well, but what *am* I to do, if I add to the table and then find the tablecloth——"

"D—— the tablecloth and Sir Nicholas Osborne too," said her husband very heartily.

And this succeeded in driving Mrs. Conway in shocked silence from the office, while there was yet time to recall the fire to existence.

Joanna in her own way was not a little interested too, when she heard the news later on. A dinner-party of ancient individuals whom she had known all her life, and most of whom she would probably see in the course of the day as well, did not appeal to her, but the introduction of an unknown man who was young and had been in the Guards was quite another matter.

She rushed up to her sister's room and dashed in with a vehemence which rather disturbed the occupant.

"Elizabeth, Elizabeth! Sir Nicholas Osborne is coming!" she cried.

"My dear child, I do wish you would not always shout at the top of your voice, and tramp about like a six-foot grenadier," said Mrs. Morris reprovingly.

Joanna made an impatient movement.

"Don't you care in the least to see anybody new?" she said.

"I don't care for anybody new to come to dinner here," said Elizabeth. "Don't you know that the dinner will be execrable and worse served; that Annie will be sure to make some mistake, and will go into fits of laughter if the conversation happens to amuse her, and that Roddy will smell of stables?"

Joanna's face fell.

"I could speak to Annie and tell her she must not laugh," she suggested, hesitating.

"Do you want her to choke, or rush out of the room?" said Elizabeth. "Joanna, I wish you would go away; my head is aching, and I hardly slept last night; I never suffered such agony."

"Well, do, like a dear, tell me what I am to wear?" said Joanna.

"That is a difficult question to decide, I own, with a large wardrobe like yours. I wasn't aware you had a choice."

"But that old yellow thing doesn't suit me a bit, and it has a split at one side," said Joanna plaintively.

"Mend the split, then. You don't expect me to evolve a dress, or the money to pay for it, before to-morrow evening?"

"You think it doesn't matter what I wear, because I am not pretty," said Joanna; "and yet you wouldn't believe how well I looked one day when I tried on a new dress of Edith Chester's. Elizabeth, you can't think how much I should like to be really well dressed, and really have a good time for once."

"You are not as badly off as I am," said Mrs. Morris sharply.

"Why, you have had your good time—a better time than I shall ever have, I dare say, and you have been married, and have Polly to think about," said Joanna, which was not exactly the most politic speech she could have made to her sister. "Elizabeth, dear, won't you come down to the village, and help me to choose something fresh to retrim the body? I have ten shillings bee-money in my pocket, and can spare a little."

"How considerate you are, Joanna, seeing that I have a headache, and that I want to finish this book; take Polly," said Mrs. Morris.

"Yes, but Polly can't help me to choose, and you have such good taste, and I have *none*. Never mind; whatever I do, I know I shall look a plain little home-made dowl," and Joanna sauntered dolefully out of her sister's room, and made her way to her own, to have another survey of the unfortunate yellow silk.

But all the same, she could not help feeling very cheerful; surely something was going to happen at last. She was vaguely excited all that day and the next, without exactly knowing why; and she was aware that she looked very different from her everyday appearance when she viewed her-

self in the glass the next evening, and that somehow the yellow silk suited her better than usual,

Poor Joanna, and poor Mrs. Conway! At the last moment came a note from Sir Nicholas, saying that he regretted feeling too unwell to keep his engagement.

It was indeed too late to do anything then; Joanna's burning indignation at the rudeness overpowered her disappointment, while Mrs. Conway solaced herself by detailing the facts of the case to all her guests.

As for Mr. Conway, he smiled serenely and said to his wife: "You see you had better have done as I said. Providence had planned the whole matter out, and was apparently not aware you had made other arrangements."

CHAPTER IV.

"I was glad that day;
The June was in me, with its multitudes
Of nightingales all singing in the dark
And rosebuds reddening where the calyx split.
I felt so young, so strong, so sure of God,
So glad, I could not choose to be very wise."

"WELL," said Joanna, "I *said* those bees would swarm, if I went to church."

It was Sunday, and Joanna's temper was never at its best on Sundays.

The Conways had dinner in the middle of the day, and she had committed the dire offence of coming in late, and on being requested to shut the door had done so with the suggestion of a bang, and subsided into her chair with cross abruptness.

The dining-room at Cliff House was dark and rather gloomy, and the occupants certainly did not look particularly enlivening.

Mrs. Conway sat at the head of the table with a severe solemnity of countenance which in its perfection was generally reserved for Sundays; Mr. Conway was as usual eating his dinner as quickly as possible, preparatory to an abrupt and unceremonious departure; Elizabeth was, also as usual, melancholy and nervous, and little Polly, a plain, long-legged child of nine, had traces of tears on her cheeks.

"I think you might put aside thoughts of your bees, at least for Sunday," said Mrs. Conway severely. "Will you have some mutton?"

"So I would," said Joanna, "only unfortunately the bees don't keep Sunday."

"Joanna!" said Mrs. Conway, in a voice which made

Joanna jump, "I will not have you speak in such a way in my presence."

Whereon silence ensued during the rest of dinner,

"Ask your sister if she will have any more pudding, Joanna," said Mrs. Conway; "because, if not, I will go and get my books together for Sunday-school."

On which Joanna said: "Will you have any more pudding, Elizabeth?" and Elizabeth said: "No, thank you, Joanna," a little ceremony which sometimes even now struck Joanna or her father as irresistibly comic, painful though it was to them all.

Joanna went to the hall-door and looked out; it was a glorious day, and they had all got quite hot walking up from church; she had not the smallest intention of spending the afternoon indoors learning her Gospel and Collect as she was supposed to do, and leaving her bees to their fate.

"Aunt Joanna," said a little voice at her side, "I do wish grandmamma would let me stay with you. I have to go down to the school and learn my Gospel while she teaches the big girls, but I can't learn while they are talking."

"Put your fingers in your ears," suggested Joanna.

"I can't learn it. It is such a difficult Gospel," said Polly hopelessly. "There is a little devil singing in my head that makes me forget every sentence as soon as I have learned the next one."

"Polly!" said Joanna, "you must be a good girl—you musn't talk like that."

"It is the little devil in me that makes me naughty," said Polly complacently, "but I will be quite good if I stay with you."

Joanna said nothing; she looked at the child for a moment, and then she walked across the hall to the drawing-room, where Elizabeth was lying on a sofa, with a surreptitious novel tucked under her pillow, awaiting her mother's departure.

"Elizabeth," she said, "that child will be ill if you don't interfere. She learned a hymn before breakfast, and she has been in Sunday-school and church ever since."

"Well, what can I do?" said Elizabeth crossly. "If you had been awake half the night with an excruciating pain in your side, you wouldn't bounce into a room like that."

"What could you do? Tell mother you won't let her go to school this afternoon, of course," said Joanna.

"You know very well I can't do anything of the kind," said Elizabeth, in an injured tone, "and if you had any consideration you would know that the very thought of it upsets me. Polly is as strong as a horse, and if you think it necessary to interfere, why don't you do it yourself?"

"If I had a child, I should," said Joanna.

"I wish you would get me another pillow, instead of talking in that improper way," said Elizabeth fretfully. "I shall have to send for the doctor if this pain goes on; it is most extraordinary the way it seems to catch my breath."

Joanna walked out of the room and went to get her hat very thoughtfully. There was nothing to be done for Polly. She watched her trotting down the avenue after Mrs. Conway, a depressed little figure with a pile of books in her arms; and then she set out in the opposite direction herself.

She expected that her swarm had done what another had done once before, gone off to a garden near, or made straight for the bogs and heather. The garden belonged to Sir Nicholas Osborne, and was indeed the source of his sixteen pounds a year, for the bare little house and bit of plantation had never been let, but Sir Nicholas Osborne had ceased to be of much interest to Joanna. He had evidently no intention of cultivating his neighbours, and as he was never visible, she had ceased to think about him.

Whether he was at home, or whether he was not, did not exercise her mind at all just then; she knew there were some apple-trees in his garden which possessed a fascination for the bee-mind, and he could not possibly object to the removal of her own swarm.

So Joanna ran across the meadow and climbed the ditch which separated the Conways' from Sir Nicholas' little demesne, and which English people would have called a bank, with her head full of her bees and all they were to do for her.

Her dreams had reached a point when she had become a very important personage, with her carvings largely admired and a fortune coming in from an improvement in bee-hives of which she was at present very full, when she almost cannoned against a man coming round the corner of the garden wall, and started violently with a sudden recollection of Sir Nicholas.

But it was only the old gardener Kelly, whom Joanna knew very well.

"I was just coming over to see if you had missed a swarm, Miss Joanna," he said, "there's a fine one on the big apple-tree at this present moment."

"Oh, Kelly, I *am* glad!" said Joanna. "I was awfully afraid they would have gone off to the bog and be lost. Could we get them now? I will run back for Richard O'Brien and a scap."

"I am thinking the best thing we could do would be to cut the branch," said Kelly; "it's not to be called a good bearing tree, and——"

"Well, will you go and ask Sir Nicholas if I can?" said Joanna eagerly.

Sir Nicholas Osborne was having a late lunch when old Kelly sent in his request, and said "Certainly," without paying much attention to it.

He was a tall, fair young man, rather good-looking, and tolerably well aware of it. He had dark blue eyes, which were inclined to err on the side of expressing too much, a big nose, and an excellent moustache. He was not inclined to undervalue himself in any way, and made no effort to conceal this fact.

But for the last six months the world had been going very, very far wrong with Sir Nicholas; so far wrong, in fact, that never as long as he lived could it go quite right again, and he was very unhappy. He resented the fact, but in his endless days alone at Ballylone he had no means of forgetting it.

Lunch was a new custom of his, adopted solely with a view to pass the day, but as he had done nothing since breakfast at eleven he naturally was not very hungry.

He lay back in his chair, yawned, and began to fill his pipe. He had smoked all morning, and he did not feel any great desire to smoke again. He thought better of it, and poured himself out another glass of wine.

A bee came hastily in through the open window in a high state of excitement and indignation, and it occurred to Sir Nicholas that he might as well go and see how they were getting on in the garden.

He got up, and passing a looking-glass on the way to the door, he spent five minutes or so in an interested effort to make both ends of his moustache exactly alike; then he gave himself an admiring glance, and strolled out of doors, catching up a straw hat as he passed through the hall.

In the garden all was excitement; it seemed full of people and bees, with a white-sheeted erection under an apple-tree for a centre. In the foreground were Joanna and old Kelly in hot dispute. He was a little, bent old man, with shaking legs, a red face, and an unconquerable belief in his own opinion.

"They *be* to be going up, Miss Joanna," he said firmly, "there are not near as many left on the branch."

"I am quite sure they are not going up," said Joanna.

"They'd have been up a good while sooner if you had let them beat the kettles to scar' them," said old Kelly resignedly, "but they are going as easy as you please now."

"I am tired of telling you that bees have no ears," said Joanna impatiently, "and I don't believe there's a solitary one in that hive."

"Take my word for it, Miss Joanna, there's more than the

half of them there," said Kelly, "Many's the time I have seen a swarm of bees into a scap, and I will maybe know a little about it. But since I was a wee fellow I have never seen it done without beating the kettles."

"Would you look if the branch was getting clear, Miss Joanna?" said the coachman's wife, who was looking on with a baby in her arms. They were all inclined to agree with Kelly, and look with disapproval on Joanna's ideas.

"Can I be of any use?" said Sir Nicholas, who had strolled up, attracted by the small crowd, for he was naturally a very sociable individual.

But Joanna's thoughts were completely centred in her bees.

"No, thank you," she said abstractedly. "Kelly, I am perfectly certain those bees are going off."

"My belief is that you're mistaken, Miss Joanna; they are going up as nicely as you could wish."

"They are going off," said Joanna. "Richard, you will have to follow them."

Old Kelly contented himself with a superior smile.

"He knows a deal about bees, Miss Joanna," said another bystander.

"Don't *you* know that all the noise in the world wouldn't make any difference to bees?" said Joanna in exasperation, turning to Sir Nicholas. She was not thinking about him at all, and addressed him merely in hope of an ally.

"Certainly," agreed Sir Nicholas, who knew absolutely nothing about it. Nevertheless his opinion made a decided impression on the bystanders.

"There!" cried Joanna, "they're off!"

And she was perfectly right. Slowly the compact little brown cloud emerged and began to rise into the air, scattering the group in all directions.

"They will be lost!" said Joanna distractedly. "Richard, you must follow them, and see where they settle."

"I be to cross the river then?" said Richard O'Brien, a tall, red-headed youth.

"Of course," said Joanna. "You can wade after all this dry weather; and for goodness' sake don't forget what hedge you find them in, as you did last summer. Stop, I will go round by the bridge, and meet you. Now go—go!"

"It is a mile or more by the bridge, isn't it, Miss Conway?" said Sir Nicholas.

"I don't mind about that," said Joanna, in a perturbed tone. "but I don't see how I am to get the hive round on Sunday. Oh, what shall I do!"

"Let me drive you round!" said Sir Nicholas, catching the excitement. "Carroll, get the dog-cart, quick."

"Oh," said Joanna, "thanks! it wouldn't matter so much,

only I can't trust to Richard a bit, and I must say I should like them settled before night. It is a very good swarm, isn't it?"

"Perhaps, Miss Joanna," said old Kelly, "you will mind me next time. If you had left it to me this wouldn't have happened."

Whereupon Joanna and Sir Nicholas burst out laughing.

But Joanna was very impatient before the horse was ready. She fidgeted, and ungratefully said she could have walked sooner, while Carroll, who was annoyed at such hasty commands, and not interested in the bees, certainly in no way hurried himself.

But when they were once off it was a most exciting chase; Sir Nicholas got almost as interested as Joanna, and by the time they had found Richard, and then the bees, which he had contrived to lose, and had settled him under a hedge to watch them, it was nearly six o'clock.

Then suddenly Joanna became very silent. The enormity of her afternoon's proceedings began to dawn upon her for the first time; she had been driving about the roads on Sunday with a young man, and she had never driven on Sunday before in her life; she had forgotten this young man's rudeness about dinner, had treated him in a very friendly, not to say unceremonious fashion, and had indeed thought no more of him than if he had been old Kelly or Richard O'Brien.

She got into the dog-cart again, because she could think of no particular reason for refusing, but she said nothing for some time.

She stole an occasional glance at her companion; he was very different from any of the few young men she had come across at Ballylone; he wore a very light suit with knickerbockers, and a straw hat rather on one side of his head. Joanna decided that he looked conceited, and still further stiffened her manner.

As for Sir Nicholas, he merely considered her shy, and presently spoke to her condescendingly.

But Joanna, in her new stiffness and dignity, scarcely answered him.

"We have had a most successful afternoon, haven't we?" said he.

"Yes," said Joanna.

"I haven't had as much excitement since I came to Ballylone."

This did not exactly require an answer, so she said nothing.

"Do you live here all the year round?" he began again.

"Yes," said Joanna, whereupon he gave up the effort, stroked his moustache, and was silent.

But when he offered to drive her home, she magically regained her tongue; the idea of driving holdly up to Cliff House

with Sir Nicholas, in a dog-cart, and on Sunday, made her shudder.

She got down at his gate with a haste which was scarcely dignified, and her good-bye was very curt and stiff.

But she danced into the house with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, very much delighted with her adventure, and not a little alarmed at the possibility of its becoming public property.

"Where in the world have you been?" said Elizabeth, who was still lying on the sofa. "You never brought me that cushion."

"Cushion?" said Joanna vaguely. It seemed about a year since she had seen Elizabeth, and she had apparently been lying on the sofa reading the same book ever since.

"And how in the world did you tear your dress?"

"I have been looking after my swarm," said Joanna, "and swarming bees are very exciting."

CHAPTER V.

"I wish and I wish that the spring would go faster,
Nor long summer bide so late;
And I could grow like the foxglove and aster,
For some things are ill to wait.
I wait for my story--the birds cannot sing it,
Not one as he sits on the tree;
The bells cannot ring it; but, long years, oh, bring it
Such as I wish it to be."

JOANNA was in her room, sitting on the floor in the midst of the contents of her chest of drawers.

She was nothing if she was not untidy, and often suffered severely in consequence; she occasionally indulged in valiant bursts of neatness, which had been known to last a whole day.

At intervals, to her horror, Mrs. Conway made a descent upon her room, placing everything with scrupulous neatness, but so that the owner could never find what she wanted, and throwing away some of her most prized possessions as worthless.

This day Joanna had gone up to her room immediately after the one o'clock dinner, with the intention of making her drawers a model of neatness, but having taken the preliminary step of depositing the contents on the floor, she had come upon an ancient bit of carving which she had thought lost, and thereupon given herself up to building castles in the air.

She saw herself, after a few lessons from some well-known carver, being politely bowed out of his studio with the infor-

mation that he could teach her no more; she saw her work the admiration of all, and herself one among many celebrities, with little Polly beside her having no more Sunday lessons to learn. Joanna laughed at herself for these dreams, and told herself in words that they were absurd. There was a hero occasionally, a completely fascinating person, with a title and plenty of money. Joanna wisely decided that she would not have an ideal, and did not intend to be particular as to the colour of his eyes and hair. At that rate, he should not part his hair down the middle like Sir Nicholas Osborne, neither should his nose be so big, nor his hat be worn on the side of his head, and above all he should have excellent manners, and not be in the least conceited.

During the last ten days Joanna had thought a good deal about how she was to behave to Sir Nicholas, should she meet him, or should he come to call, but neither event had as yet occurred.

Her Sunday adventure was a great deal more interesting to look back upon than it had been at the time, especially after she had related it to Miss Chester, and it did seem dull that nothing came of it. She would have liked to prove to Sir Nicholas that she had not the smallest intention of letting herself be patronized.

She was sitting on the floor with her elbows on her knees, in the middle of a very interesting conversation with him in which she was having decidedly the best of it, when Mrs. Conway, who never thought it necessary to knock, suddenly made her appearance with a pile of work in her arms.

"Well, Joanna," she said, in a tone of resignation, "I don't know if you are aware that it is three o'clock, and that Mrs. Moreland has arrived already."

Joanna jumped up in dire dismay.

"Oh," she said, "I am very sorry; I didn't know it was so late, but I won't be half a minute now, really."

"Perhaps you again intend to go for a walk with Edith Chester?" said Mrs. Conway scathingly, "but, if not, would you kindly not leave all your clothes to litter the floor, and change your dress and come down as quickly as possible."

"I was only going to tidy up," said Joanna. "I will be as quick as I possibly can, and," in a conciliatory tone, "I will work hard."

"I wish you wouldn't drop grease all over your carpet, Joanna," was Mrs. Conway's parting benediction.

Joanna's effort in the line of tidiness was a failure; she had to bundle everything back into her drawers, and then hastily change her dress, after which she wasted ten minutes in a hurried search for her work, which had somehow managed to get put away with the rest of her belongings. So, when she

reached the drawing-room, she found the Zenana meeting thoroughly settled down to business.

The drawing-room at Cliff House was a small, square apartment, with furniture ugly but solid. There was a piano in one corner, which daily caused Polly bitter tears, and upon which Joanna was still expected to practise for an hour and a half every day. She had learned music all her life, with the result that she now played almost as well as a fairly advanced child of ten.

On the opposite side of the room stood a big chiffonier, on which were ranged china cups and saucers which Joanna was expected to dust every morning, and which were always getting her into trouble by proving to have concealed accumulations of blackness in unexpected corners. The rest of the furniture consisted of ponderous tables and chairs, and a writing table which nobody ever used.

The corner near the piano was now occupied by Mrs. Moreland, a preternaturally ugly and extremely deaf old lady, who was usually content to sit and work in silence, but woke up at odd and generally awkward times, and insisted upon having the whole conversation repeated to her. Next to her sat Miss Clarke, a stern and belligerent lady, who was on exceedingly strained terms with Mrs. Conway, to say the least of it. Having elected themselves as a sort of amateur churchwardens, they had ample opportunities of disagreement, and after a lull in hostilities occasioned by the vacant parish, were now prepared to fight to the death over the new clergyman. Miss Clarke had just secured a frequent bone of contention at these meetings in the shape of the sewing-machine, and was consequently looking mildly triumphant.

Then there was Mrs. Chester, a fat, goodnatured, and rather vulgar person, troubled with an inconvenient sense of humour. She was not a member of these meetings, was suspected to disapprove of them, and was looked on very coldly in consequence. But Miss Chester, having promised her assistance in a moment of virtuous enthusiasm, had found two meetings sufficient to damp her ardour, and so had made over the honour of representing her, together with a half finished and somewhat puckered frock, to her mother, for whom she said and thought it was very good and suitable. The rest of the meeting consisted of Mrs. Morris, who was yawning unconcealedly behind her work, and little Polly, who sat on a high chair, and pricked her fingers over a handkerchief which would be amply sufficient in size were the whole Zenana at one and the same moment to be stricken with colds in the head.

Mrs. Conway sat very erect at a table in the middle of the room, with a pile of missionary reports beside her, and a warm petticoat, half finished, on her knee.

She laid down the missionary report on Joanna's entrance, and waited with resignation till she had shaken hands all round, and retired to a seat near Mrs. Chester.

"I am in hopes," said Mrs. Conway, addressing the meeting generally, "of seeing the Rev. Mr. Jellett among us this afternoon. I have left orders that he is to be admitted, if he comes."

"He arrived yesterday," said Miss Clarke, anxious to prove that she was completely informed upon the matter. "I sent him a note as soon as I heard of it, informing him of this meeting, and telling him that I was sure you would be glad to see him."

"That was indeed kind of you, Miss Clarke," said Mrs. Conway, in tones of indignation, "but I think you might almost have left the matter to me."

"I was writing in any case," said Miss Clarke, taking her work out of the sewing-machine and surveying it. "I wished to let Mr. Jellett know that he was welcome to the use of our gardener to get the Rectory grounds put in order."

"That again I think you might almost more decorously have left to me," said Mrs. Conway, who was full of wrath that this brilliant idea had not occurred to her.

"What? what did you say?" said Mrs. Moreland suddenly.

"That report was very interesting," said Mrs. Chester, who had not heard a word of it, "may we not have some more?"

"Perhaps if Miss Clarke has *quite* finished, she will allow Mrs. Chester to have the machine," said Mrs. Conway.

"I was just about to use it again," said Miss Clarke, "but of course if Mrs. Chester requires it——"

"Oh, not in the least," said Mrs. Chester hastily.

"Then, if you are *sure* nobody else requires it," said Miss Clarke meekly, "I should be glad to have it for a short time longer."

Whereupon she used it for a tiny seam she would have found it much easier to sew by hand.

Tea made a happy diversion at this stage of the proceedings, and just as Joanna had finished pouring it out there was a knock at the hall-door, and everybody started.

"It is Mr. Jellett, I suppose," said Mrs. Conway, in a tone of sudden amiability.

There was a general little bustle, from which Joanna held herself sternly aloof.

Then the door was opened, and the maid announced: "Sir Nicholas Osborne."

Joanna dropped her work and became a vivid scarlet, but nobody noticed her; not even Sir Nicholas, who was unhesitatingly and with small disguise wishing himself at home again.

He did not believe he had ever seen so many old women together in his life—certainly not a group that looked so completely as if they had come out of Noah's ark. He felt and looked dismayed.

After the first pause of surprise and almost consternation Mrs. Conway rose: "Won't you sit down," she said, "and have some tea? May I introduce you to Mrs. Moreland, Mrs. Chester, and Miss Clarke and my daughters."

Sir Nicholas bowed vaguely in response to this wholesale introduction, and sat down with a good deal of extra manner on.

"Thank you," he said, "I should like some tea. Lovely weather we are having."

Then he glanced round the room in what Joanna considered a very supercilious way, and became absorbed in his moustache.

Joanna became suddenly conscious of a shabby dress and a lack of stays, also of an extreme fear lest Sir Nicholas should disclose their former meeting.

But Sir Nicholas had no intention of doing anything of the kind, and indeed was not troubling his head much about her.

"I am afraid I am in the way," he said.

"Oh, not at all; we are very glad to see you," said Mrs. Conway, who would have liked to convince the rest that Sir Nicholas was a habitual visitor, had it been at all possible.

In the meantime Joanna was endeavouring to suppress Mrs. Moreland, who was inquiring: "Who is he?" in a stage whisper, and everybody had stopped working.

Sir Nicholas went to Joanna for his tea, but he did not sit down beside her as she had expected. He moved over to Mrs. Morris, who had struck him as the only pretty woman in the room, and addressed her with the slight stammer with which he sometimes spoke—not so much a stammer as an occasional difficulty in getting out a word.

"I be—believe we have met once before in the village," he said; "in McCracken's shop, wasn't it?"

"I was down there once this week," said Mrs. Morris, "but it is very seldom that I can get so far. This place does not agree with me."

"I should have thought it was healthy, at least," said he.

"Perhaps you don't suffer from neuralgia," said Mrs. Morris plaintively. "I endure a perfect martyrdom—sometimes I can't sleep for nights."

Sir Nicholas ceased to be interested; Mrs. Morris was disappointing. When he put down his cup he remained standing beside Joanna.

"What are you making?" he said, which question happened to be embarrassing. Joanna blushed, and he did not wait for an answer.

"What about those bees?" he said.

"Oh, hush!" said Joanna under her breath. He nodded, and all at once they seemed to have jumped into intimacy.

"I feel a deep interest in them, however," he said. "Couldn't you," with a brilliant inspiration, "take me to see them?"

"Now?" said Joanna. "Oh, no!"

"That is rather unkind," said Sir Nicholas. "I was thinking of starting bees, and hoped you would give me a few hints."

And then he followed up an unintentionally significant look which Joanna threw at her mother, and astonished her much by the temerity of his prompt request. Still more was she surprised by Mrs. Conway's equally prompt and suave consent.

CHAPTER VI.

"Some men, like pictures, are fitter for a corner than full light."

THEY walked down the garden in silence. Sir Nicholas was making a rash vow that nothing would persuade him ever to enter Cliff House again, and was congratulating himself on having escaped, and Joanna was divided between a desire to acquit herself with dignity and the delight of finding herself free in the sunshine with somebody new and young.

Mr. Conway, with an eye to the practical, had planted his garden entirely with vegetables and fruit; only in Joanna's little corner were there flowers, and even they were rather with a view to business, too. The garden covered a little more than an acre, and had high walls all round it, consequently Joanna and Sir Nicholas found themselves very completely alone.

Joanna's natural friendliness conquered her dignity before they had passed the raspberry bed and got to the cabbages.

"You don't really want to see the bees, do you?" she said.

"I must confess," said Sir Nicholas, "that my chief object was to get away from all those old women. I have no doubt they are most worthy ladies, but, you see, I am not greatly in the habit of attending sewing meetings."

Joanna laughed. "If you are going to live here, you will have to get accustomed to old women," she said. "For the remarkable thing about this place is that nobody ever dies."

"Heaven forfend that I should live here," said Sir Nicholas, in dismay.

"I don't know whether you have remarked that the village is full of ancient people, who look as if they wouldn't live a

week," said Joanna. "And I have got a theory for it—would you like to hear it?"

Sir Nicholas made use of his favourite expression, "Certainly," and returned to his moustache, which he had neglected for some time.

"I think it is because they get so accustomed to doing exactly the same thing every day, and to nothing happening, that it never occurs to them it is possible to make such a change as to die," said Joanna, and having reached her own part of the garden, she stooped to pick up a weed.

"That's an idea," said Sir Nicholas, looking at Joanna for the first time. "But you don't suppose those old people want excitement?"

"I don't know, I am sure," said Joanna. "But I know that I should like some. I'll tell you what I want: I want to be—*thrilled*!"

"D-do you?" said Sir Nicholas, with his slight stammer, and a very significant look from his long, blue eyes.

They came to the beehives, and sat down on a seat near, which Joanna explained she had made entirely herself.

Then she was perfectly happy, for, while they were walking, the recollection that her dress did not hang quite straight had troubled her. Joanna had hardly ever talked to a man with whom she could feel herself on a level before, and she liked it very much. His manner, and the way he sometimes looked at her,—which came perfectly natural to him,—was delightful to her, and dimly exciting.

As for Sir Nicholas, whose society lines had generally lain among married women, he thought Joanna a very nice, fresh little girl, and found the afternoon very pleasant.

It was she who first remembered, with a shock of horror, that they had been a long time away.

"Must we go back?" said Sir Nicholas lazily. "Then you p-promise me the next swarm, don't you, Miss Conway?"

"Not that old Kelly will let you have anything to do with it," said Joanna. "Come, Sir Nicholas, we must really go."

"But, first of all, you will give me one of those red carnations for my buttonhole, won't you?" said Sir Nicholas.

He had selected a plant which Joanna had intended for a country flower-show a few days later; but after a short hesitation, which he took for coquetry, she gave it to him—which was exceedingly foolish, as anything else would have done for him quite as well.

"It has been awfully jolly sitting here," he said. "And I hope we shall always be capital friends now."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Joanna. "If I meet you in a condescending humour, I am afraid we shall not."

Sir Nicholas laughed. "I give you free permission to snub

me, in that case," he said. "Not that I at all acknowledge that I ever tried to condescend to you."

But all the same, when they reached the house again, he had his very grandest manner on.

The amiability of their reception was something marvellous, and Sir Nicholas was pressed to come again in a way which would have troubled Joanna if she had been a little older. As it was she was delighted, with a frankness which he did not entirely interpret aright.

"That is an exceedingly nice young man," said Mrs. Conway, when he was gone. "Don't trouble about your work, Joanna; you can easily make it up some other time."

Joanna opened her eyes wide, but said nothing.

To her sister she was more communicative.

"He is very good-looking," said Mrs. Morris.

"Do you think so?" said Joanna. "I can't say I admire him, and he is dreadfully conceited and affected."

"I don't wonder you are hard to please, living in a place like this," said Mrs. Morris.

"But, Aunt Joanna," remarked Polly, "why did you give him one of the show carnations?"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Morris; "you are a very intelligent child, Polly."

Meanwhile Sir Nicholas strolled homeward, very well content with his afternoon. He liked Joanna, though she was not at all what he would have called his sort. However, months at Ballylone had made him ready to be rather easily pleased.

Not unnaturally, being a young man who liked society and soft cushions and good dinners, he was bored—bored to extinction.

Even if all one's prospects have come to a dismal collapse, and life altogether has gone wrong, it is not pleasant to be bored—at least, Sir Nicholas did not find it pleasant.

There are some advantages, undoubtedly, in going through life without any particularly fixed principles, but there are likewise some drawbacks.

Nicholas Osborne had been sent into the world with an extreme aptitude for spending money, but, unfortunately, very little money to spend. If this had been all, he might have been no worse off than a hundred men of his acquaintance.

But he had scarcely had a fair chance.

It is a drawback to a boy to be allowed to scramble up in a household filled with men of doubtful character and women of character not doubtful at all; also to be dowered with a name predisposing all his acquaintance to consider him a scamp: with these drawbacks, Nicholas Osborne started into life.

His father troubled himself not at all about the boy: he was there, and he was fed and clothed, after which he was welcome to amuse himself as he saw fit, and to pick up harm if he chose or good if he could. Personally, Nicholas enjoyed himself: everybody was kind to him, there was always amusement of some kind within reach, and there were plenty of horses to ride.

When he was nearly fifteen his father died, which was fortunate for him. He was sent to Eton, which was very flat at first, but, being gifted with a perfect genius for accommodating himself to circumstances, he soon made himself happy there, and was very popular and much admired. As far as anybody could judge, he did not seem to have picked up much harm, and he was more inclined to let himself be influenced than to influence others. Certainly he was contentedly ignorant, caring for nothing but horses and racing; and those who knew him best were aware that his word was not entirely to be depended upon; but he was extremely kind-hearted, excellent company, and particularly generous with his money, as far as it went.

He left Eton without getting into any serious scrape, and did sufficiently well at James', where he was sent to cram.

When he went into the Guards his name caused him to be looked on with a certain amount of suspicion; but the suspicion died away, as there seemed to be no particular reason for it.

On first acquaintance, men still sometimes said to each other: "Osborne?—not that blackguard Osborne's son? I wouldn't trust one of that lot further than I could see him."

But on further acquaintance they were inclined to admit that he was not a bad fellow, in spite of his name.

Nicholas himself really intended to live his life satisfactorily before the face of all men, and if he had been a rich man he would, in all probability, have been a very estimable and popular member of society.

But being in the Guards, he unfortunately failed to realise that he was a poorer man than most of his brother-officers, and that he could not conveniently live in exactly the same way as others with more than double his income.

Nicholas could have more easily made up his mind to rob a bank than to incur the contempt of a railway porter by an insufficient tip; this, too, was unfortunate.

Also he had one expensive taste—horse-flesh—and a tendency to do as others did which led him to throw away money on things which gave him no pleasure; most unfortunate of all, he fell in love with a Lady Florence Delacque, who was married, and was not in any way calculated to affect him toward good.

Sir Nicholas was a very good-looking, "smart" young man, and was in the best society; he went to the first tailor in town for his clothes, belonged to numerous clubs, and could stroll down Bond Street as though half London belonged to him. He also looked very well when he rode through the streets in uniform, or came in first, in blue with a white cap, on a race-course, but he very often had not a shilling in his pocket, and Lady Florence, who admired him very much, knew this. On the other hand he was desperately in love with her.

One day he gained from her the admission—a safe one—that, if lack of funds had not been an objection, she might have consented to give up all for him, whereupon Sir Nicholas became very unreasonably elated.

It was about this time that a dreadful thing happened to him, and if Lady Florence's promise had anything to do with it, nobody could say so, least of all Nicholas himself. Besides a great many people declared that the thing had been going on for a long time before it was found out—it was the bad Osborne blood coming to the front.

Be that as it may, one night at the Guards' Club Nicholas' play was suspected,—sooner than it would have been, perhaps, had he been known by any other name,—he was watched, and two or three days later suspicion became certainty.

He had been playing with Guardsmen, who did not wish to be harder than was necessary; but this was a crime which to them was as no other.

They gave him his choice between public disgrace, and sending in his papers, taking his name off the Guards' Club, and abjuring baccarat. He chose to take their offer.

He said himself that he was a much wronged man, and the victim either of a plot or of a terrible mistake. He said it with a passionate conviction which brought awful misgiving to one or two of his accusers.

Be the truth what it might, it was utter ruin for him.

He said good-bye to Lady Florence, and crossed the sea to Ireland and Ballylone; choosing this place, partly because he had no money and no credit to go anywhere else, and partly because he wished to avoid the risk of meeting anyone he had ever known.

He was intensely miserable at first, but it was not in his nature to be always miserable.

What was the use of sitting down to brood over a thing which could not be helped, for the rest of his life? Was it not better to forget it when he could?

And if Joanna helped him to forget it, it was evident that he must cultivate Joanna.

CHAPTER VII.

“ On the cold hill under the sky,
Here to-day, in the cloudy weather,
The wind, as he passed me by,
Laugh'd, ‘ They two are walking together
Merry, and I know why,
For I met them as I came hither.’ ”

CLIFF HOUSE lay between the village and the Lodge, where Sir Nicholas lived. His avenue gate opened a little further up on the road, which went eventually to Derry, and gave admission to a narrow track, needing gravelling sorely, and leading straight up to the house. The entrance was by no means imposing: the avenue, such as it was, was lined on either side by straggling groups of half-grown trees, and old stumps in different stages of mossiness, which marked the numerous occasions upon which Nicholas and his father had wanted money. They had gone on wanting it, till every tree worthy of the name had been cut down; but then, they had certainly neither of them ever expected to live at the Lodge.

The house itself had been built half as a fishing lodge, half as a gardener's cottage, in the days when there were fish to be caught in the river near.

It was a tiny, square house, with a tiny hall and a straight stairway leading to three or four tiny bedrooms. Downstairs there was the kitchen, the dining-room, and a room known as “ the office,” where some ancient rods and flies still remained and where old Kelly kept some of his gardening apparatus.

But fish in the Lone now were few and far between. It was a very small river, which flowed behind the Lodge and Cliff House, and then, winding round, made its way with a series of little waterfalls to the village. There was one dark pool, where little Edwin Conway's body had been found years ago, but in most places it was shallow enough, even running nearly dry in the summer.

From the Conways' house the road made a circle of an Irish half mile before it reached the village, but there was a short cut, known as “ McCracken's loanan ” which came out directly behind McCracken's shop, and nearly opposite the little house on the street where Mrs. Moreland and her son the doctor lived.

The Chesters and the Clarkes were both a little way out of the village, on opposite sides.

Miss Clarke and her brother lived on the road which led past the church to the station, and they were next to the

Rectory, which in parochial matters gave Miss Clarke a distinct advantage over Mrs. Conway.

It was Sunday, and a very wet Sunday too; but nevertheless all Ballylone was in church, for it was Mr. Jellett's first appearance, and everybody considered it his or her duty to support him by presence and criticism.

The church was full of umbrellas and waterproofs.

The Conway umbrellas were making quite a little puddle on the carpet of the pew, and a small stream was slowly winding in the direction of Polly's little black legs.

Miss Chester was in church, and as a rule she had a particular aversion to going out on wet days; she had put on a new dress, too, in spite of the rain which pattered against the windows, and even trickled in through one, and dripped slowly down upon the monument: "Sacred to the memory of Edwin Conway, aged twelve."

Sir Nicholas Osborne was in church, a fact of which Joanna was immediately conscious, as also that he wore a still presentable carnation in his buttonhole. Between Thursday and Sunday there are forty-eight hours, and this meant that he had put the flower twice in water. He looked very handsome and Joanna thought a black coat suited him, and, as she would have said herself, felt a little "thrilled."

He divided the attention of the congregation with the new clergyman, a small, pale young man, who hurried through the service rather nervously, and preached a ten minutes' halting sermon.

Then there was a gleam of damp sunshine, during which the "quality" stood in a group near the porch and discussed Mr. Jellett. The village people went home, and discussed him too.

They all considered his delivery poor and his vestments not all that could be wished. Mrs. McCracken, while wishing to stand up for her lodger, "allowed" that he might have given them "a while longer," and Mrs. Conway said substantially the same.

"Don't let me keep anybody," said Mrs. Conway. "I am only waiting to see Mr. Jellett, and ask him to come to early dinner; I disapprove of Sunday visitors, but the clergyman is an exception."

"It is so good of you to think of it, dear Mrs. Conway," said Miss Clarke, "but he is coming to us."

Joanna was looking round for Sir Nicholas, who seemed to have disappeared; she shook hands with everybody abstractedly, and reflected that he was very rude.

Miss Chester came up to her eagerly. "I wish I had gone to the last Zenana meeting," she said. "I hear you had a great excitement."

"Well," said Joanna, "I didn't feel much excited. Polly, put on your waterproof ; it is beginning to rain again."

"Come on now," said Miss Chester. "Sir Nicholas has only just gone out of the gate. I know quite well that he wants to speak to me, and he is sure to come up to you if he sees us together."

Joanna agreed that they had better go on ; the short gleam of sunshine was over.

They passed Sir Nicholas talking to somebody at the church-yard gate, and he took off his hat to Joanna.

But as they splashed along High Street he came up to them, with the collar of his coat turned up, and rain dripping from the rim of his hat, his nose, his moustache.

The others, with tucked up skirts and drenched umbrellas, were making their way through a network of mud and puddles. Little Polly hopped about, splashed rather more than was necessary, and remarked complacently that she had water running about inside one of her boots.

"How do you do, Miss Conway ?" said Sir Nicholas, holding out a damp hand.

"May I introduce you to Miss Chester ?" said Joanna, in a desperate hurry, lest she should be thought unfriendly.

But Miss Chester had not long to enjoy the introduction, for their ways parted at McCracken's loanan.

She would have walked round with Joanna if it had been a fine day, or if there had been any possible excuse, but in default she was obliged to say good-bye, without even the felicity of shaking hands with Sir Nicholas, who had no wish to stand still in the rain.

"I suppose," said Joanna, with some hesitation, "we had better go by the short cut. I don't see any sign of my father and mother, but they walk very slowly."

"You don't propose waiting here for them, I hope ?" said Sir Nicholas, who was standing disgustedly in a puddle.

"I hope you have got thick boots, if you are coming with us," said Joanna anxiously.

He laughed, and said that he defied the mud even of an Irish lane to get through his shooting boots, and then they started.

"That was a Miss Chester you introduced me to just now, wasn't it ?" said Sir Nicholas. "There's no doubt she can make good use of her eyes, but she's getting a bit long in the tooth, isn't she ?"

"What on earth does that mean ?" said Joanna, who thought it a very ugly expression ; and over an explanation they became quite friendly, and she began to think the wet and mud absolutely rather pleasant than otherwise.

"Aunt Joanna, your umbrella is dripping down my neck," said Polly, who was clinging to her hand.

"Why, Polly, what have you been doing? Your dress is mud up to your waist," said Joanna, waking up to the little girl's existence with dismay.

"You don't like wet Sundays, do you, young lady?" said Sir Nicholas.

"I don't like any Sundays," said Polly, in a depressed tone. "You wouldn't, if you had to learn Collects and Gospels. Had you, when you were a little boy?"

"Never!" said Sir Nicholas, with great truth.

"I don't mind going to church so much," said Polly, taking some trouble to walk into a particularly fascinating puddle, "because mamma said I might tell myself stories during the sermon."

"Polly, you naughty child!" said Joanna; and then Polly dropped out of the conversation, and finding herself unobserved, amused herself by shaking the hedge whenever she got near enough, thereby giving herself a very complete showerbath.

Sir Nicholas said good-bye at the Conways' gate, by which time, in spite of Joanna's umbrella, they were all three as wet as possible.

He distinctly held her hand a little longer than was necessary, and let his blue eyes meet her brown ones very directly.

"When shall I see you again?" he said; and though Joanna only laughed, and said she hadn't the slightest idea, the words kept running in her head the rest of the day as she sat indoors, learned her Gospel, and watched the rain pelting against the windows. "When shall I see you again?" he had said, and in the garden on Thursday, "I hope we shall be capital friends now." "Must we go back?"

Joanna wondered if all men said things like that, and would look at her like that, and decided that Sir Nicholas was better looking than she had imagined at first.

CHAPTER VIII.

*"Oh, ne vous hâtez point de mûrir vos pensées,
Jouissez de matin, jouissez du printemps;
Vos heurs sont des fleurs, l'une à l'autre enlacées;
Ne les effenillez pas plus vite que le temps."*

MRS. CONWAY never wrote letters on Sunday, but the very next morning, after a slight remonstrance from her husband, she sent a note to Sir Nicholas asking him if next Wednesday would suit him to come to dinner, or if not, would he settle his own evening?

She defended her proceeding on the highest moral grounds.

"You know every soul in Ballylone will say you are throwing yourself at that young fellow's head, and making very little of Joanna," said Mr. Conway.

"That I cannot help," said his wife severely. "I was never one to give up doing what I thought right in fear of uncharitable remarks. If Edwin had lived and had gone to live alone, would we not have wished others to be kind to him?"

And to do her justice, Mrs. Conway really believed in her own explanation of her motives.

Of course Sir Nicholas was amused; he was rather flattered than otherwise, though a trifle bored, and he would have been immensely astonished had anyone told him that Joanna knew nothing about the invitation. He felt a decided diminution of his desire to see her again, but he accepted for Wednesday all the same.

Then Mrs. Conway asked Mr. Jellett and the Clarkes, and everybody said, especially Miss Chester, that the way she was running after Sir Nicholas was disgraceful.

The dinner party was not altogether a success. To begin with, it was depressing to be assured up to the last minute that Sir Nicholas was absolutely sure to fail, which ungrateful task Mr. Conway took upon himself; and then there was a terrible disaster in the kitchen, where the girl who had been brought in for the evening quarrelled with the cook, and between them a tray of soup-plates came to destruction.

Whereupon Polly, an excitable little person, who was nearly out of her wits at the idea of wearing her best frock and coming down to dessert, further aroused her grandmother's wrath by laughter, and on refusing to stop, was conveyed to the wine cellar and shut up there in the dark. Joanna, who was half dressed, made an effort, hoping against hope, to get Elizabeth to interfere.

Elizabeth was sorry, though she wished Joanna would not upset her when she knew how it vexed her to hear that Polly was in trouble.

They made an expedition to the wine cellar together.

"No," said Polly, in a shaky voice. "Don't be so sorry, mamma; I don't so very particularly mind it."

"You see," said Elizabeth, "mother won't enjoy her dinner-party if she thinks you are frightened, Polly; it is only quite little girls that are afraid of the dark."

"I am not afraid," said Polly valiantly. "I know it is all nonsense to see little black men corkscrewing out of empty bottles. My eyes see such funny things in the dark. I shall tell myself stories as fast as I can."

"Yes, don't be ridiculous," said Elizabeth.

"There are such lots and lots of bottles!" said Polly,

"Wouldn't it be funny if grandmamma was to come and find me quite drunk?"

"You mustn't taste anything," said Elizabeth. "Come, Joanna; we must go."

But Polly called Joanna back for a minute.

"I am so disappointed," she said, with a sigh. "I don't think the little Sunday devil ought to have come to make me laugh on Wednesday, do you? I *am* a tiny bit frightened, Aunt Joanna; the bottles always dislike having me here."

"I would stay, dear, if I could," said Joanna, who thought she had heard a knock. "Be a brave girl, and I will ask grandmamma to let you out after dinner."

"Don't tell Sir Nicholas that I was naughty," said Polly, in a whisper: she had taken an immense liking for Sir Nicholas, added to extreme admiration.

Consequently Joanna had to finish her dressing very hastily, and not even the thoughts of the dinner-party downstairs could make her quite happy.

She was late, but Sir Nicholas was later—so late that even Joanna was almost convinced that he was going to fail them again, with a sinking of heart and a good deal of injured vanity.

And when he did come, he was quite different from the Sir Nicholas of the garden and the wet lane. He was languid, rather affected, and openly bored. He stroked his moustache, and looked as if he thought it too much trouble to answer when spoken to.

Dinner was rather trying. They were an uncomfortable number, and no arranging could make things very satisfactory.

Sir Nicholas took in Mrs. Conway, and she had managed to put Joanna on the other side; but under the shadow of her mother, and oppressed by Sir Nicholas' manner, Joanna had nothing to say.

Mr. Jellett opposite was enduring agonies of shyness, and conversation languished and came to awful pauses.

Mrs. Conway and Miss Clarke were both full of anxiety to instruct Mr. Jellett, and the conversation at Cliff House was never of a light and frivolous description. Mr. Conway and Mr. Clarke exchanged opinions about farming from opposite ends of the table; Sir Nicholas barely pretended to listen to an account of Mrs. Morris' ill, and Joanna surreptitiously watched him, and decided that his nose *was* exceedingly ugly, and a trifle crooked.

The dinner was bad, the maid Annie allowed her admiration for Sir Nicholas to engross her to the neglect of her duties, and Roddy smelt of the stables.

Things began equally unfortunately in the drawing-room. Joanna to her horror was sent to the piano, while Miss Clarke and Mrs. Conway took possession of Mr. Jellett.

Sir Nicholas sauntered after Joanna.

"Shall I turn over?" he said, strangling a yawn.

"You are going to be astonished," said Joanna desperately. "If there is anything I hate, it is being sent to play, when I can't. It is misery to me!" and there were actually tears rising to her eyes.

"Shall I play instead?" said Sir Nicholas good-naturedly. "It will be a charity to me, for I have no piano at the Lodge, and you shall play to me some other time."

"Oh, thank you!" said Joanna, with alacrity. "How is it you are so nice sometimes, and sometimes so horrid?"

Sir Nicholas laughed.

"I am sorry to hear I am sometimes horrid," he said, "b-but no one could help being nice to *you*."

He looked at her, and kept his hand for a moment on hers as they turned over the music. Then he sat down, and played one thing after another, while Joanna felt that the world was a very delightful place after all.

In the distance she heard: "I can assure you, Mr. Jellett, Jane Bruce is a very deserving case."

"I am very sorry to differ from you, Mrs. Conway, but I don't want Mr. Jellett to be imposed upon, as I am afraid you must have been. I know for a fact that Jane Bruce drinks."

"I think you have been misinformed, my dear. As a young man, and new to the parish, you may have difficulties, Mr. Jellett, but I shall always be very glad to help you. I am sure you agree with me that a clergyman should devote at least four days a week to visiting among his people?"

"The parish is a very scattered one, and if you take *my* advice——"

So it went on; Mr. Jellett making no effort to speak, Mr. Conway sleeping in his chair, Mrs. Morris trying to make conversation for Mr. Clarke, who wanted to go home, while Joanna sat by Sir Nicholas and talked to him under cover of the music.

And at last they all departed, after Mrs. Conway had asked Mr. Jellett to close their first meeting with a prayer—a proposal which filled him with such utter dismay that he never afterward knew how he managed to refuse and get himself out of the house.

Elizabeth dashed into Joanna's room as she was getting into bed.

"Polly!" she said, "you have forgotten Polly!"

"Good gracious! I got her out directly after dinner," said Joanna, in astonishment.

After this evening, somehow or other Joanna and Sir Nicholas began to meet constantly and to become quite intimate.

Certainly Polly generally assisted at these interviews, but she could scarcely be called a restraint, and though she listened with all her ears, and probably meditated deeply over all she heard, she never asked any questions.

As for Joanna, she was more thoughtless than Polly ; and when Sir Nicholas asked her what she was going to do next day it seemed the most natural thing in the world to tell him. Her life had all at once turned into excitement, and she enjoyed it without attempting to discover why, and became so accustomed to it that it never occurred to her it might not go on forever.

When she went to bed at night she knew that in all probability she would see Sir Nicholas the next day, and he had become so much a part of her life that the days before she knew him seemed dim and far off, and she would have thought it just as possible that her father or her mother should go away and be lost sight of as that he should.

Joanna wondered how she could ever have found Ballylone dull, and why she had been in such a hurry to leave it.

Even her mother seemed to have miraculously changed, and was quite ready to invite Sir Nicholas to the house, but he very much preferred avoiding the bother of preliminaries, and the Conway family in general bored him very much.

Meanwhile Miss Chester developed one of her sudden and violent affections for him, opening the attack by a tendency to visit McCracken's at the time when she knew he came for his paper.

Sir Nicholas confided his trials to Joanna, but was exceedingly capable of defending himself had he been very anxious to do so.

Miss Chester, perceiving that she was not making any perceptible progress, turned her attention to Mr. Jellett, who had already quite enough trouble on his hands. He was striving his very best for peace, and Miss Chester, whom he immensely admired, decidedly complicated his difficulties, by taking it into her head to influence him in a high-church direction, which was the line of his own inclination, but not likely to make him popular in Ballylone.

She even began to make him a very gorgeous and ritualistic altar-cloth, much to his embarrassment ; and having sewed on a couple of inches of gold cord she made the work over to her mother, which was rather hard, as Mrs. Chester was low church in her tendencies, and had strongly disapproved of the altar-cloth from the first. She also disapproved of her daughter's advances to Mr. Jellett from the point of view of propriety, but Miss Chester said it was quite time her mother got rid of such old-fashioned notions and prejudices.

At the same time, she did not neglect Sir Nicholas.

CHAPTER IX.

"Sitteth the fair ladye
Close to the riverside,
Which runneth on with a merry tone
Her merry thoughts to guide :

"It runneth through the trees,
It runneth by the hill,
Nathless the lady's thoughts have found
A way more pleasant still."

"WHAT in the world are you doing ?" said Sir Nicholas.

Joanna was sitting on the wall just outside Cliff House gate and displaying a rather liberal amount of ankle.

"I am thinking whether I shall go back for an umbrella," she said.

"And when you have thought, what are you going to do ?" said Sir Nicholas.

"Send you, very likely. Yes, you can smoke."

It was delightful to know that this imposing person could be sent messages by her, and that he would put out his cigarette if she wished ; it even gave her a certain satisfaction to see him raise his hat to her.

Sir Nicholas leaned his elbows on the wall beside her, and looked at her.

"I don't think it will rain," he said, "but I'll go if you like"—this without any very great alacrity. "What I want to know is, where are you taking that neat little basket to ?"

"I am going," said Joanna, "first to take the jelly in this basket to Mrs. O'Brien, who is ill ; then I am going on to the dressmaker's, and then to the post-office to put in ten shillings bee-money. If you want to come, you must put your hat straight and contrive to look rather less almighty."

"I never was so brow-beaten as I have been for the last few weeks," said he mildly. "In spite of my unfortunate manuer, and the peculiar formation of my head, which is *not* my fault, I assure you I feel a perfect worm."

He looked extremely well satisfied with himself nevertheless, as he lounged there beside Joanna ; and to be satisfied with himself was absolutely necessary to Sir Nicholas' happiness. His conceit was not of the contented, assured kind, but of a very thin-skinned description—it was easily flattered, but at the same time easily injured. There were times when he thought himself a very fine fellow, and others when he was ready to believe himself a scoundrel ; and the admiration or contempt of the person he happened to be with, even were it old Kelly, made all the difference. He had dropped his best

friend at Eton, because he fancied the latter had discovered the falsehood of some boyish boast.

Consequently, Joanna's admiration was particularly cheering just now.

"Look here," he said. "Do you think you could all come over to tea on Monday? That Miss Collard with the squint says she wants to see my shanty, and the strawberries are splendid."

"Oh," said Joanna, jumping down from the wall in her excitement, "you *do* think of such delightful things! You are not joking, are you?"

"Why in the world should I be joking?" said Sir Nicholas, with a laugh. "Will Mrs. Conway come, do you think? If so, I'll ask the Kellys to come over as well."

Joanna was very sure indeed that her mother would come when she heard the Kellys and Collards had been invited, and her excitement pleased and amused Sir Nicholas very much.

"If you come, you must fight it out with old Kelly about those bees," said Sir Nicholas. "I have done my best to obey your orders, but he does not trouble to conceal his contempt for my opinions."

"I'll go over to-day, when we get back from the village," said Joanna serenely; "and that reminds me, we had better start. I do hope the dressmaker will have my dress finished for Monday, don't you?"

And then they started, to do all their errands, and end up with going to Mrs. McCracken to beg for tea, an honor which somewhat overwhelmed that worthy woman.

The Monday tea party got between Joanna and her rest; it interfered with her carving and made her forget to send off a batch of flowers at the right time; it even spoiled her excellent appetite.

Then a cloudy morning caused her agony; if it rained, would they go? would Sir Nicholas expect them?

Mrs. Morris sagely suggested that it would be sufficiently soon to decide that question when the rain began, and happily fears proved unnecessary.

After dinner Joanna flew up to her room at once to dress, and took longer about it than she had ever taken in her life. She produced and tried on in turn every bit of finery she possessed, asked Mrs. Morris' advice till that lady declined to give any more, and then had recourse to Polly, who was deeply interested.

What was her horror when the mighty question was at last decided, and she and Polly came downstairs together, to find that Mrs. Conway had not even begun to get ready. Joanna ventured on a remonstrance.

"Oh, mother," she said reproachfully, "Sir Nicholas *said* we were to be early."

And Mrs. Conway consented to be hurried with a meekness that made her daughter quite anxious, and brought them to the Lodge ever so long before anybody else. Polly went, by special invitation, and Polly's mother, much against her will, was left behind on Mrs. Conway's stern decree that they would be too many.

Sir Nicholas was at his best in his own house; his manner, even to Mrs. Conway, was absolutely free from affectation, and he was very much at his ease and made everybody else feel so, too.

Joanna was nervously anxious that things should go off well, and felt deeply for Sir Nicholas, who was not at all anxious. She saw with dismay the amount of cream everybody, including the host, heaped on their strawberries; for the coachman's wife had come over to Cliff House that morning to ask if there was any to spare, so Joanna knew that it was scarce. She declared that she preferred her strawberries alone, which was not true and was a sacrifice which always remained unappreciated. When Miss Collard asked for another cup of tea and there was none, Joanna suffered, while Sir Nicholas made a laughing apology, and rang the bell, and Miss Collard did not mind in the least.

Mrs. Conway was very much on her dignity, and desperately afraid of being slighted. The Collard and Kelly girls were a good deal older than Joanna and knew each other well; they at once swept up Sir Nicholas and Mr. Jellett.

It was young Marcus Kelly who fraternised with Joanna, insisted on her coming down to the river with him after tea, and fishing with an old rod which he had unearthed.

The Kellys had lived in the South till within the last five or six years, and this youth had brought from there a quite remarkable Irish accent, and a capability for half accidental, half intentional, bulls which delighted Joanna. Besides he was rather an interesting person; he had been on the car with his father when the latter was shot by moonlighters in '84; she had heard tales of his boyish pluck when the house was afterward boycotted; she was consequently prepared to like him, even when she discovered him to be a tall, red-haired youth of about her own age, with nothing at all heroic about him.

"No," said Joanna, "I have never been to London, or out of Ireland at all."

They were sitting on the grass by the river, and Polly, who had been very shy and glued to Joanna's side all afternoon, was now contentedly fighting "cocks," one hand against the other.

"It's so odd not to have been to London," said Marcus Kelly. "Not that it's a place I care for, but I mean to have a good time when I go there in September for my exam."

Then he disclosed that he was at Pritchard's cramming for the army.

"Not the Guards?" said Joanna, thinking of Sir Nicholas.

"Well, hardly—worse luck!" said young Kelly, with a laugh. "Osborne is in the Guards, isn't he?"

"No, he has left," said Joanna.

"Fourteen heads off," said Polly, in a low voice.

"You bloodthirsty young person!" said Marcus Kelly. "Miss Conway, I challenge you to battle. I will even give you that extremely stalwart cock for your champion, and I will content myself with this one, which is drooping and faded."

"How shabby!" said Joanna indignantly; "you know the bending ones are the hardest to beliead."

And much to Polly's delight, in this interesting occupation the fishing-rod was forgotten; after which they blew the fluffy heads of dandelions to see if it was time to go in, and were exceedingly silly and enjoyed themselves extremely.

Joanna's reception on her return was a decidedly cool one; her mother was annoyed with her for going off with a penniless younger son and leaving Sir Nicholas to the others, and Sir Nicholas was annoyed, he did not exactly know why; but he had a sort of feeling that she ought to have sat still, patiently waiting till he was quite ready to talk to her.

Joanna, however, was too entirely pleased with her afternoon to be easily subdued.

"Well, you *are* in a sweet temper," she said gaily, when Sir Nicholas bid them a dignified farewell at his gate.

"I b-beg your pardon?" said he, in his grandest tone.

But Joanna only laughed, and ran after her mother.

"Joanna," said Mrs. Conway, "did you remark that Mrs. Collard scarcely touched my hand in saying good-bye?"

"I can't say I did," said Joanna.

"And those Kelly girls—they might have troubled themselves to speak to me a little civilly; but no—they were thinking of nothing or nobody but Sir Nicholas, and treated me as the dirt beneath their feet."

Joanna had heard too much of this kind of thing to be much impressed.

"I suppose they thought you had Mrs. Collard to talk to," she said cheerfully; "as for me, I had a delightful afternoon."

"As for you," said Mrs. Conway, suddenly turning her attention to her offending daughter, "as for you, Joanna, I can only say that I am ashamed of you."

"Ashamed of me!" repeated Joanna, in the extremity of astonishment.

"Oblige me by not repeating my words," said her mother. "After all the care and trouble I have given to bringing you up; all the pains I have taken to make you a modest, Christian girl——"

Joanna looked utterly bewildered.

"You know perfectly well what I am alluding to, Joanna, and I will not have you look at me in that impertinent way. I might have known what your neglect of your duties, your ceasing to care for good works, your love for dress would lead to!"

"Mother, what *have* I done?" said Joanna, in a low voice, holding Polly's little hand tightly.

"You ask me what you have done? After you have wandered off and been hours alone with a young man, till everybody wondered what had become of you, and I blushed for you. I tell you it was improper, immodest, unladylike, unwomanly!"

Joanna grew crimson to the roots of her hair.

"I don't know what the Collards, what Sir Nicholas can have thought of you," pursued Mrs. Conway.

"But, mother," said Joanna, "I have been with Sir Nicholas——"

"Don't dare to answer me, Joanna! Go to your room at once. I will go to mine and pray for you."

Joanna rushed into the house and up to her room like a whirlwind.

Was it true? was it true? she wondered. Had she been improper, unwomanly, immodest, and all without knowing it? In the first moment she felt as if it must all be true; as if she must be indeed a girl too evil for this world, since she had done these terrible things without even being conscious of her guilt. She felt herself disgraced forever, and as if she could never bear to face anybody again.

Immodest—and yet surely her mother must know—surely this was the reason of Sir Nicholas' coldness—he knew she had disgraced herself.

Then all at once the memory of Sir Nicholas recalled to her the fact that she had been again and again alone with him, with her mother's knowledge, and her strong common sense began to come to her rescue. She had learned long ago that what her mother said in anger was not to be relied on as strictly true, and that she had some very odd ideas which neither Joanna nor anyone else agreed with. She did not argue or think about it, she simply felt it; she did not blame her mother, she looked upon it as a matter of course and a law of nature. Still, if it was proper for her to be alone with

Sir Nicholas, it could not be so very immodest for her to sit for an hour by the river with Marcus Kelly and Polly.

But all the same the words rankled in her mind and were not to be forgotten. Never again could Joanna feel quite the same half childish ease and unconscious friendliness in her companionship with men.

CHAPTER X.

“ Ce n'est point par effort qu'on aime,
L'amour est jaloux de ses droits,
Il ne dépend que de lui-même.
On ne l'obtient que par son choix.
Tout reconnaît sa loi suprême,
Lui seul ne connaît point de lois.”

THE next day Joanna and Sir Nicholas were reconciled.

She and Polly met him, as they came out of the avenue gate, with bundles of orange lilies in their arms.

He had never seen her look so nearly pretty as when she stood waiting a minute till he came up, with a watery gleam of sunshine on her wavy hair, and for the first time a slight blush.

“Well,” she said, with a flippancy which was a little nervous, “I hope you feel better this morning?”

But it was not for Sir Nicholas' dignity to acknowledge that Joanna had offended him.

“You have a vivid imagination,” he said. “Where are you going to?”

“To the village; I promised Mrs. McCracken these lilies; you know to-morrow will be the 12th.”

“Don't go to the village,” said Sir Nicholas; “it's simply lovely by the river just now. Look here, Polly; you won't mind running down with these flowers by yourself?”

“N-no,” said Polly, who liked going to the river as well as anybody.

“Oh, I don't know,” said Joanna, “whether I ought to go. No, I think I had better go on with Polly.”

It was almost the first time she had opposed any suggestion of his, and he stared at her.

“What is the matter?” he said. “Why in the world shouldn't you go? Besides, are you aware that you left a most valuable rod of mine there yesterday afternoon, and I want you to point out where it is?”

“Oh, how stupid of us!” said Joanna, in dismay.

She gave her lilies to Polly, and turned obediently, but after a few steps she paused.

“Sir Nicholas,” she said, “I want to ask you something,

please. I don't know myself, because I have always lived here and seen nobody, but will you tell me, is it wrong for me to go about with you like this?"

He was very much astonished.

"Why, Miss C-Conway?" he said, his stammer very decided.

"If you please, tell me exactly," said Joanna earnestly.

"There is no harm—certainly no *harm*," he said; "especially as there is nobody here to t-talk. That is to say, it would not do with everybody, you know; but as we are friends—no, I am sure it is all right, Miss Conway."

"I am very glad," said Joanna frankly. "I could not have borne you to think—that is, I hope you don't think me very silly now?"

They had crossed the meadow by this time and were getting near the river. There were haymakers in the field behind them, but now they were alone, except for half a dozen young cattle that were grazing near.

"I think you—a very sweet girl," said Sir Nicholas, in a low voice.

He did not know what was the matter with him; he had never felt inclined to say such things to her before. As for Joanna, she felt "thrilled"—and liked it very much indeed.

It was extremely delightful by the river, even though it rained a little at intervals of a few minutes, and though it was rather cold, and Joanna's feet were wet. Something very odd seemed to have come to them both, and they talked so little that Joanna made a serious apology.

"We generally have such a lot to talk about," she said. "I don't know what it is, or which of us is stupid."

"We know each other well enough now to be silent if we like, don't we?" said Sir Nicholas, moving a little nearer to her on the damp tree-trunk which they had chosen for a seat.

"And you are sure it doesn't bore you?" said Joanna, half in good faith.

"Bore me?" said Sir Nicholas. "I would rather sit here with you than with anyone in—in Ireland."

Which was quite true.

He took Joanna's little brown hand, which had been gathering orange lilies and was not over clean, and kissed it several times, and she felt as if she were in a dream.

She was delighted, flattered, bewildered, and her: "You must not touch me, Sir Nicholas," in a tone of would-be offence, would not have deceived little Polly.

When they parted at Cliff House, they had mutually spent a very satisfactory afternoon.

"What are you going to do to-morrow?" said Sir Nicholas.

"To-morrow is the 12th," said Joanna. "The procession

will march up here in the morning; will you come and see it?"

"Will you come to the river with me in the afternoon?" said he.

"Perhaps—we shall see," said Joanna.

Sir Nicholas walked back to the Lodge, a little perplexed by his afternoon. Till to-day it had never occurred to him as possible that Joanna was in the least likely to be dangerous to him. He had feared for her peace, and been very careful only to be friendly; but that a little country schoolgirl, the daughter of his solicitor, with an appallingly common mother, could possibly affect him in any way had never entered his head. Besides, was he not entirely devoted to Lady Florence Delacque, who was anything but a schoolgirl?

But Lady Florence with much wisdom had declined to allow him to write, and somehow his life seemed so utterly different.

He tried to get up an enthusiasm by the remembrance of Lady Florence's eyes, and when he got back to the Lodge he took out her photograph and studied it; but Joanna's face, which was not even pretty, got between him and it, and the touch of her fingers, and the remembrance of how close she had been to him for a moment or two when he had helped her over the meadow stile.

All very nice and idyllic and suitable to the first love of a boy of nineteen, he said to himself impatiently.

Whatever Sir Nicholas Osborne's detractors might say, he *did* sometimes think; and the result of his reflections upon this occasion was that he did not turn up next day to watch the Orangemen or take Joanna to the river.

The procession with its gorgeous lodge-masters and portentous flags marched up to Cliff House door, where everybody assembled on the steps to bow, and Mr. Conway put on his hat for the express purpose of taking it off to the flags and having them lowered in his honour. The "Protestant Boys" was performed with much effect as to drums, and smothered attempts to be heard on the part of the cornets, and then everybody filed off in the direction of the Lodge; but still there was no Sir Nicholas. Joanna and Polly even went down to the avenue gate to see the gaily dressed womenkind, and an occasional straggler with a gay scarf, who had already found his way to a public-house or been detained by the charms of some fair maiden.

Presently they returned unescorted, but Joanna was quite untroubled; she was confident Sir Nicholas would turn up in the afternoon, and just at present she was very busy overseeing the digging of potatoes in her own particular field. Richard O'Brien, being a Roman Catholic, was working considerably harder than usual to mark his disdain of the day.

After dinner Joanna told Mrs. Morris that Sir Nicholas was going to the river with her, and seated herself in the window of her own room to watch for him. She was in her own room still when her sister came back from a visit to the Chesters.

"What, Joanna," she said, "are you back from the river so soon?"

"I didn't go after all," said Joanna, with a fine affectation of carelessness, "and I have been too lazy to go out; so I think I will just run down to McCracken's now for some shoe-laces; I shall have time before supper."

"I don't advise you to go just now," said Mrs. Morris; "the procession has got back, and I met Roddy, looking more than cheerful. Mrs. McCracken wouldn't like you to go, she is so proud of Roddy's steadiness. So the great Sir Nicholas did not deign to come over this afternoon?"

"He couldn't come, and it would have been a horrid day for the river," said Joanna, with dignity.

"I can tell you one thing, Joanna; you are making it much too easy for that young man. It would be rather better if you left the running after to him," said Mrs. Morris.

"Nonsense!" said Joanna roughly.

"My dear child, when you shout like that your voice goes through my head," said Mrs. Morris plaintively. "I am fearfully tired and I know I walked too far; I felt quite faint in the street just now; didn't I, Polly?"

Joanna said "Nonsense," but she was very much hurt all the same.

CHAPTER XI.

"You love this man; I've watched you when he came,
And when he went, and when we've talked of him;
I am not old for nothing; I can tell
The weather signs of love; you love this man!"

"MRS. MCCRACKEN, I *hope* you have got some shoe-laces; mine are a perfect disgrace," said Joanna; "this one is knotted in three places."

"I haven't got any silk ones, Miss Joanna; Miss Chester got the last."

"Anything will do," said Joanna, and then the conversation floated to new potatoes, in which she was particularly interested, and by an abrupt transition to Sir Nicholas Osborne.

"Has Sir Nicholas gone for good or only for a while, Miss Joanna?" said Mrs. McCracken, as she twisted the laces up into a neat little parcel. "I saw him drive past on the car"—every kind of vehicle was a car to her, from Sir Nicholas' high dog-

cart to the butcher's spring-cart—"yesterday it was, before the drums got back."

"Gone!" said Joanna rather breathlessly. "I didn't know he had gone."

"Well, I am surprised at that, and you so great with him," said Mrs. McCracken. "You might have knocked me down with your thumbnail the day you brought him in here for a cup of tea. I was that ashamed I didn't know where to look; but he is a very nice, pleasant-spoken gentleman, for all that he is, as you might say, the height of the quality. Mrs. Moore was in the other day and saying to me what a nice pair you would make, and indeed, Miss Joanna, it's I that would come to your wedding with a light heart."

"Oh, you mustn't talk about such absurd things, please," said Joanna, turning very red. "Tell me about Mr. Jellett; is he a good lodger?"

"He's not ill to please, Miss Joanna," said Mrs. McCracken, turning suddenly grave, "and he's got a pretty face and a nice way of speaking to you, but I can't say that I'm quite well pleased. I don't hold to his new-fangled ways, and the Greek and Latin books. I thank God the Bible in its original English has always been enough for me as it was for those before me. I call the way he has been going on nothing less than popery, with crosses up in his bedroom that it goes to my heart to dust, and never a word of hell or the devil in his sermons."

"I am sorry," said Joanna, who had not heard one single word, but was vaguely aware that something was wrong.

And then she made her escape.

Ten days later Mrs. Conway picked up an old hat of Joanna's which she found in the hall, and which did not suit even its owner, and made Mrs. Conway's long face look ghastly, and walked out to the garden, where she found her husband making a tour of inspection.

"John," she said, "I want to speak to you about Joanna."

"Well, what is the matter?" said Mr. Conway, without any overwhelming anxiety. "Don't you call those remarkably fine peas, Marion?"

But Mrs. Conway was not thinking about peas.

"Can you tell when Sir Nicholas is coming back?" she said.

"I am sure I haven't the slightest idea," said Mr. Conway, leisurely gathering a pod and opening it. "All well filled, you see, Marion."

"I am not at all surprised to find that you value your peas more than your daughter's peace and happiness," said Mrs. Conway severely.

"Her peace and happiness? Pray be a little more lucid."

"Have you got eyes, John, or have you not? Haven't you remarked how Sir Nicholas was always coming over here and going about with Joanna?"

"You know I remarked it," said Mr. Conway, "as I told you you had better put a stop to it."

"Well, you have remarked how he ran after Joanna; and now he has gone away without a word."

"I must say, I always thought you and Joanna ran after *him*," said Mr. Conway, "but you are quite right to put it the other way—it sounds better. Did you ever see anything like the way the snails have got among those strawberries? I must have something done."

"You must have something done about Sir Nicholas," said Mrs. Conway, restraining her indignation with an effort. "I am not going to have my daughter made miserable and the talk of the country."

"You should have thought of that a little sooner," said her husband.

"Somebody must write to Sir Nicholas."

"That somebody won't be me," said Mr. Conway with great decision.

Joanna was miserable enough, and he had noticed her want of spirits, which she thought was completely hidden. The return to absolute flatness and dullness, with nothing to look forward to, seemed worse than ever now; and it was a very long time since she had last seen Sir Nicholas.

"It won't be you, either," said Mr. Conway, after a pause.

"I am not going to force any man to marry my daughter. I am sorry for Joanna, but she must have a little common sense. A young man like Sir Nicholas Osborne isn't likely to want to marry a country attorney's daughter."

"You know I hate you to call yourself an attorney," said Mrs. Conway. "Well, since your daughter's happiness is absolutely nothing to you, I can say no more."

And much to her husband's relief she made a retreat, the dignity of which was spoiled by Joanna's straw hat, which had unconsciously got to quite a jaunty angle.

Mr. Conway thought a good deal about Joanna after this; he was very fond of her, and when she said she was not hungry, and refused new potatoes at dinner, he began to think something must be seriously wrong, and roused himself to insist on her going round the farm with him in the afternoon; but there was a decided diminution of her interest in mangel-wurzels and reaping machines.

He was thinking about her rather uncomfortably next morning, as he walked down to his office, when he suddenly heard flying feet behind him, and she joined him, breathless and crimson.

"Oh, father!" she gasped, "oh, father!"

"My dear child, you must not run down the street like a madwoman and without your hat," said Mr. Conway, looking at her. "Come into the office."

"I ran all the way from the house," said Joanna. "Mother was putting on her things, and I was so afraid she would get here first."

Mr. Conway drew her into his private room, and shut the door.

He could not imagine what was the matter, and was rather alarmed. Had Sir Nicholas suddenly returned or announced that he never would?

"What is it?" he said.

"Oh, I know it will be no use!" said Joanna despairingly, "but, father, I shall never ask you for anything again—it would make me completely, absolutely happy, and it won't cost anything—I will pay for my clothes myself."

Had she already begun to consider her trousseau? That seemed undoubtedly quick work.

"Tell me what it is all about," said Mr. Conway. "Perhaps I shan't object to its costing me a little."

"There might be a chance if it was only you!" said Joanna, nervously making circles on the tablecloth; "but mother will never consent, I know; and, father, I can't bear it if she doesn't!"

Mr. Conway was beginning to get quite excited.

"Would you be surprised to hear that your mother was quite willing?" he said.

"Oh, no, it can't be possible!" said Joanna. "No," with her sudden gleam of hope fading, "you have not seen her since."

"Tell me what you are talking about at once," said Mr. Conway.

Joanna should certainly have a reasonable trousseau, and Mr. Conway might possibly be the better of the connection in a business way; Sir Nicholas' brother-in-law, Lord Meredyth, had a good deal of Irish property.

"Immediately after you went," said Joanna, in a tragic tone, "the post came. I wasn't expecting or thinking of anything, and I am quite sure it is all Marcus Kelly's doing, for such a thing never happened before."

This speech entirely bewildered Mr. Conway, for he failed to see how Marcus Kelly could possibly be concerned, and the conclusion of Joanna's sentence seemed odd.

"The letter was to mother," said Joanna, with deep anxiety in her brown eyes, "and I should not have known anything about it, if there had not been a printed card as well, which fell out on to the table."

"A printed card?" repeated Mr. Conway.

"Yes, father, with my name on it, too," said Joanna, "and neither of us said anything about it; but I just ran straight out of the house, and over to you to see you before mother did, and to beg and pray you on my knees to consent!" This was a figure of speech, as Joanna did not go on her knees.

"Will you oblige me by telling me in plain English what all this is about?" said Mr. Conway.

"I know mother thinks it is wrong," said Joanna, "but I shall *never* want anything so much in my life again. Father, it is a dance that the Kellys are giving; and I beg and pray and implore of you to say I may go."

Mr. Conway's face grew very blank indeed.

Joanna noticed it with a sinking heart.

"I will never bother you about anything again," she begged piteously. "I will be quite content here, and not grumble about sewing meetings. I can buy my own dress, father; I have got more than thirteen pounds. Please, please, don't say no!"

"Pooh! I thought you were a sensible girl," said Mr. Conway, in disgust. "All this fuss about a dance! You know your mother doesn't approve."

"Oh, father, you won't say no—you aren't going to say no?" said Joanna, in despair.

And Mr. Conway, who was naturally good-natured, ended by yielding, to her ecstatic joy.

She went out to the post-office to set on foot preliminaries for getting out her money at once; what matter that it had been originally intended for a very different purpose? Joanna was fully convinced she should never want it again so much. Till the evening she lived in a dream of bliss, and then came direst disappointment.

"What is all this absurdity about your wanting to go to this dance, Joanna?" said her mother.

"Oh, mother!" said Joanna.

"You know how strongly I disapprove of light amusements of the kind which draw your thoughts away from higher things," said her mother; "and you never said a word to me about wanting to go, in the morning, so, as a matter of course——"

Joanna gasped.

"As a matter of course I wrote a refusal for us both at once," said Mrs. Conway.

"Oh, mother!" said Joanna suddenly bursting into tears, "Oh, what shall I do? Am I always never to go to any place like other girls? Wouldn't you let me go? Couldn't you write and say that it was a mistake?"

"Joanna, I am ashamed of you!" said her mother severely, "after all the trouble I have taken to train you, to behave in

this childish manner. Go to your room, and pray for grace to think less of the things of this world."

"I shall never forgive you—never!" said Joanna passionately.

CHAPTER XII.

"He looked at her as a lover can,
She looked at him, as one who wakes—
The past was a sleep and her life began."

It must be acknowledged that for the rest of the week Joanna's temper was not at its best. As Polly said, she "flounced" about the house and looked gloomy and ill-used.

She could have borne it, she thought, if her hopes had not been raised so high; if for one whole day she had not believed that all was going well.

Nobody except Polly sympathised.

Mr. Conway remarked dryly to his wife that he did not think the state of Joanna's affections need give rise to anxiety, and Mrs. Conway replied that till now she had not believed that her daughter was an absolute fool.

Mrs. Morris said wisely that as Joanna had never learned to dance, she did not see that a ball would have been much pleasure to her, to which Joanna replied passionately that she would have practised night and day if she had been going.

Only Polly said nothing either about Sir Nicholas or the dance.

On Monday there was a school-feast in the meadow behind Cliff House, and Joanna, having enjoyed three days of gloom, could not help cheering up a little.

Mr. Jellett was the giver of the festival, having been informed that therein lay his duty, and with perhaps a faint hope that it might bring him peace; but Mrs. Conway, having presented the meadow, where the hay had just been stacked, took entire command.

There was a great cutting of currant loaves and bread and jam in the morning, in which occupation Mr. Jellett and Joanna were assisted by Miss Chester, who had come up uninvited.

Mr. Jellett followed her about with eyes of intense admiration, with the result of severely cutting his finger, and having to be attended to and bound up.

"Joanna," said Miss Chester, "do you know, July though it is, I am going to another dance next week?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Joanna, and added rather sharply, "I do wish you would try and cut that loaf more evenly."

"Have you heard about it?" said Miss Chester. "You know I can't cut bread, and this is very fresh. It is a dance at the Kellys', and they are always jolly in that house."

"Do you know that they asked me?" said Joanna. "Mr. Jellett, please don't trouble to cut any more bread—you can't with a couple of inches of rag round your finger."

"And they wouldn't let you go? What a shame," said Miss Chester. "Such a splendid house for a dance—you would have loved it."

"Young Kelly told me the floor was not very good, when he was over," said Joanna.

"No, the dancing room isn't much, but there are most splendid places for sitting out. Oh, Mr. Jellett, I don't suppose you approve of that."

"Nor of dancing either," said Joanna.

"I don't see the slightest harm in dancing," said Mr. Jellett, in surprise. "Mrs. Kelly very kindly asked me to go, but I thought it was better not, under the circumstances."

"I should think so!" said Miss Chester, with a laugh. "Joanna, I see your mother coming up from the meadow, and I am off for the present; I fear to see her face when this loaf comes before her."

Miss Chester, whose assistance was always perfunctory, vanished hastily.

"What a very charming girl she is!" said Mr. Jellett, with a timid sigh. "She has been so very kind to me; but really I am afraid I shall not be able to stay here, Miss Conway; it is so impossible to please people. Did you remark that several people walked out of church because I attempted to have a hymn during collection?"

Yes, Joanna had remarked it, and had heard a good deal about it since, too.

"And I am afraid there will be trouble over the altar-cloth that Miss Chester is so kindly working for me. Even to-day I am afraid Miss Clarke is displeased about something."

"Miss Clarke and mother are always quarrelling," said Joanna. "You can't possibly be at peace with both, and just now my mother thinks you are perfection."

"I am sure I am very glad she likes me," said Mr. Jellett with a sigh, and so worked upon was he by Joanna's sympathy, that before the bread-cutting was over he confessed to her under his breath that he, too, would have liked to go to this dance.

In the afternoon, as Joanna was busy laying tables and forms under her mother's orders, she had a surprise.

She was on her knees on the grass counting mugs, with a horrible fear that there were not enough, when a voice behind her said:

"Hallo! what festal arrangements are these?" and turning round, there stood Sir Nicholas, serene as ever.

Joanna had been rather offended by his abrupt departure, and had intended to greet him coldly, but every idea of the kind flew out of her head at once. The flatness of the last fortnight was over.

"Oh!" she said, jumping to her feet, "you have come back again. What a long time you have been away!"

"Exactly a fortnight," said he, "and I have got a new horse."

Joanna's flush and hasty greeting touched and flattered him.

"Are you glad to see me again?" he said, in a low voice.

"People in Ballylone are glad to see *anyone*," said Joanna, "But I haven't time to talk to you now. Won't you stay and help—please?"

And then what did it matter to her that the disagreements and quarrels of the afternoon were innumerable; that Miss Clarke unconcealedly rejoiced over a shortness of mugs, and insisted on having a board brought to keep her feet from the dampness of the meadow? What matter that Mrs. Conway declared the currant loaves which had been ordered by Miss Clarke were poor and short of fruit? or that Mrs. Moreland considered that the way Mr. Jellett always managed to catch Miss Chester when they played games was disgraceful; also the way in which Miss Chester caught Sir Nicholas? What matter even that Mr. Jellett was bewildered by a dozen different suggestions, and in the effort to please everybody succeeded in offending one and all?

Joanna had her own share of selfishness, and Sir Nicholas had never devoted himself so openly to her before. It almost made her forget the dance.

As for Sir Nicholas, he meekly handed round buns and tea, he even played games under protest, but as the crowd began to thin he called Joanna aside.

"Look here," he said; "there are lots of people to attend to this show, and I cannot stand Miss Chester, or play any more rings. I have tried to start Aunt Sally under your orders, but it doesn't seem to take, so please let me have my reward."

His blue eyes were full upon Joanna's face. She looked very fresh and young in her white dress, which was simple and pretty, though it was made by a country dressmaker, and had a streak of red currant jam down the front, of which she was uncomfortably aware.

She had got thick shoes on, her hat was a broad threepenny straw with a bow of Indian muslin, there were several large freckles on her nose, and though running about had brought her a pretty colour, she was not pretty.

Sir Nicholas inwardly compared her to Lady Florence Delacque as they walked across the meadow together.

Joanna got the garden key out of the hall, and they went there, while he stroked his moustache, looked at her, and was eloquently silent.

"Oh," said Joanna, "have you been asked to the Kellys' dance?"

It was not in the least what he had expected her to say, and somehow rather jarred upon him.

He nodded, a habit of his which always annoyed Joanna.

"And are you going?" she said breathlessly.

"I don't know; I haven't answered yet, but I don't dance, so I don't see much p-point in driving eight miles at night. But I haven't come here to talk about the Kellys' dance, please, Miss Conway."

"What shall we talk about then?" said Joanna gaily; "beehives, and how I lost a swarm since you left?"

Somehow or other she began to tell him about her projects, about her carving, about her hopes of London some day.

"I should like to be a famous, important person," she said, "but of course there is no hope of that. If I was pretty, I should marry some grand person, but as I can't do that it will take longer."

"Who told you you were not pretty?" said Sir Nicholas, betaking himself to his moustache.

"My glass, my common sense, and my mother," said Joanna. "I am obliged to believe them, though I would much rather not."

"Will you believe me?" said Sir Nicholas.

"Elizabeth has always impressed upon me never to believe any man," said Joanna lightly. "Sir Nicholas, I have always thought this was a largish seat, but there doesn't seem to be room for two—thank you. Elizabeth says I shall never marry because I am not pretty, and mother says I shall never marry because I keep my room in such a state. Did you ever hear it said that a man ought not to propose to a girl till he has taken her into her room and made her find something in the dark? Now I can't find my things by daylight, and just now my room is in a state to make an angel weep."

"It's a capital test—I should like to try it," said Sir Nicholas reflectively.

"Aunt Joanna," said Polly, who had come softly across the grass in her tennis shoes, "grandfather says they want you to start a last game."

"Father!" said Joanna, "why he is not in the meadow at all!"

"Bother!" said Sir Nicholas.

"Don't you want to go back?" said Polly anxiously. "I

could stay instead of Aunt Joanna, if you liked, but I suppose you would not care for that."

Sir Nicholas did not go back to the meadow; he said good-bye to Polly and sauntered across to his own house.

Was he in love with Joanna or was he in love with Lady Florence, or was he in love with both or neither? For the life of him he could not make up his mind.

His fortnight in Derry had bored him. He had knocked up against a man he knew slightly, he had bought a horse, which he could not afford, and played a little polo. Everybody was glad to mount a crack player, but he was so much too good for all the rest that he found the play dull.

He rode in some small local races and went out occasionally to dinner, but he did not find it exhilarating.

His hotel bills were more than moderate, but when a man with, for the time being, little over one hundred a year, spends sixty pounds on a horse and forty-five on a polo-cart, besides denying himself nothing, he is apt to find himself rather hard put to it.

He was always given to talking big, and though there were rumours that he had creditors innumerable to pay off, nobody knew anything positive about it, and everybody considered Sir Nicholas capable of attending to his own affairs. He would have thrown away his last penny to gain admiration, and it simply never occurred to him to do without anything he wanted—if there was not money to pay for it, so much the worse for somebody.

His riding was genuinely admired, and he had no doubt that he could teach fellows in a line regiment a thing or two. He even talked vaguely of inviting them down to Ballylone for shooting, though there was nothing to shoot there but cats and crows, and he gave them a big dinner the night he left the hotel, which was a great success, and the bill for which he requested to be sent to him at Ballylone.

He left an excellent impression behind him, was gratified, and found himself absolutely beginning to forget the last episode of his life in the Guards.

He thought of Lady Florence Delacque a good deal, and considered himself a model of fidelity. Joanna was rather a disturbing element. To do him justice he entirely recognized the wrong he would do her by disturbing her unconsciousness, if he meant to go no further; but of late he had been seized with a strong desire to say tender things to her, and he was not accustomed to denying himself. Yet he was undoubtedly in love with Lady Florence; and could he have afforded to marry, Joanna was still not the wife he would have chosen to honour.

His mind was made up for him by chance. One evening

after dinner he put on his hat and sauntered out in a rather depressed frame of mind. He had just had a long letter from his sister Lady Meredyth, the first since his arrival at Ballylone, and she had written of Ascot and the Derby and Lady Florence Delacque, and wondered what had become of him, and why he had left the Guards and buried himself alive.

"I suppose you dine on potatoes and buttermilk, and swear devotion to red cheeks and short petticoats," she said. "When I asked Lady F. D. about you, she said her memory did not go back so far. She was looking very well in spite of your defection, and had Lord Gorsham entirely at her feet. If you don't soon return to civilisation you will find yourself very thoroughly replaced there."

Sir Nicholas pulled at his moustache till he hurt himself, and knocked the heads of thistles off viciously with his stick as he walked through his little plantation.

How could he go back to civilisation? There were a thousand reasons against it.

That very day last year he and Lady Florence and some others had been spending a hot week on the Thames in a house boat, and just about this time in the evening, when the light was beginning to fade, he and she had strolled ashore and had spent a long, happy hour under a haystack like a couple of children, and she had been much softer than ever before.

The smell of hay from the Conways' meadow came to him, and he turned naturally in that direction. His mind was full of Lady Florence, of her eyes, her lips, her voice, her closeness to him, and as he came to the meadow bank a dark figure under a haystack made him start with a sudden ridiculous hope. A moment after he swore softly to himself, with the conviction of old Kelly or Richard O'Brien.

All the same he stopped and said: "Who is there?" in a shaken voice.

"It is me—Joanna Conway."

Sir Nicholas jumped over the bank with a sudden impulse.

"You!" he said, in a voice and with a look which only Lady Florence had known; "what are you doing here?"

"I was cross," said Joanna, under her breath; "I could not stay in the house."

"I am so glad to have found you," said Sir Nicholas.

His tone frightened her.

"I had better go in," she said.

But the hay, the place, the remembrance of last year had gone to Sir Nicholas' head.

"No, *darling!*" he said, and that was all Joanna ever remembered of her first proposal.

She was frightened, bewildered, delightfully excited.

He had ceased to distinguish between this year and last, between Lady Florence and Joanna.

"And to think," said Joanna, "that I was nearly ready to cry about that dance when you came."

"You shall go to as many dances as you like some day," said Sir Nicholas passionately.

"They will let me do anything now, they will be so pleased," she said. "I suppose it wouldn't do to make your being engaged to me a condition of my being allowed to go to this one?"

"I am afraid not," said he, in an odd tone.

"I suppose you are right," said Joanna, with a sigh. "You can't *think* how funny I feel."

"Happy I hope, darling, *darling*," he said.

"Happy? I feel delighted!" said Joanna; "it is the most thrilling thing that ever happened to me."

But her heart was not touched.

CHAPTER XIII.

"And she loves me! this morning the earth pressed beneath
Her light feet keeps the print. 'Twas no vision last night,
For the lily she dropp'd as she went, is yet white
With the dew on it's delicate sheath!"

NEXT morning they met in the meadow by appointment. Joanna in her excitement had lain awake half the night, thinking of this truly marvellous thing which had happened to her, and Sir Nicholas, having utterly failed to make himself or his feelings out, had given up the attempt and gone to sleep.

"Good-morning," said Joanna.

Sir Nicholas raised his hat and said nothing; he was much given to eloquent silences.

"Isn't it a glorious day?" she said rather nervously. "Do you know I have been up since all hours, trying to prove the advantages of a new churn to the cook."

"You are not absolutely punctual," said Sir Nicholas; "I have walked twice round the meadow, and counted six pieces of currant bun and three sweets on the grass."

Joanna knew this; she had watched him from her bedroom window, held back, not by coquetry, but by a delightful kind of shyness.

"I didn't know there were still remnants of the school-feast," she said.

A ridiculous idea came into her head that perhaps Sir Nicholas had forgotten or repented of what he had said the night before.

"Well, darling," he said suddenly, "you have not changed your mind in the night?"

She gave a sigh of relief.

"Come and sit under our own particular haystack again," he said; "I want to talk to you before I go to your father. What do you think he will say?"

"Oh, he'll be delighted. I am sure," said Joanna placidly, "and what is more, so will my mother."

"You haven't told her yet, then, dear?"

"No, I have told nobody but Elizabeth. We can sit here if you like, of course, Sir Nicholas, but if they see us from the potato field they may think it odd."

"What does it matter if they do?" said Sir Nicholas. "It matters a great deal more that you should not call me 'Sir' Nicholas."

And then an interlude ensued, which amused and touched Joanna, but which she honestly thought very silly.

"But my sweetheart," said Sir Nicholas, a little later, "I dare say you don't know that I am a poor man—that I shall have to work before we can marry. I am in debt, and I shall have to ask you to wait a year or two. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least," said Joanna, with a disconcerting promptness; "it will be much nicer to be engaged for a bit."

"I shall always be a poor man, and there is the title to keep up. Would you like us to emigrate and drop it?"

"Oh, no!" said Joanna, with great candour.

Sir Nicholas had not been more than one-third in earnest, but nevertheless her extreme decision annoyed him.

"Joanna, you don't care for me," he said.

"N-no, I am afraid not," said she, in a depressed tone; "of course if you think it better not, we need not go on being engaged; but if you will wait a little I *promise* I will."

"I will wait as long as you like," said he, "and I won't bother you about it. I won't ask you again for a long time."

He did not—not till next time they met.

And then came great changes in Joanna's life. Everybody congratulated her, everybody thought it an excellent thing for her, and everybody thought well of Sir Nicholas. She liked being a person of importance, she liked getting presents from Sir Nicholas; she mightily enjoyed the whole matter. Mr. Conway, to whom he had partly disclosed the state of his finances, was not quite so well pleased.

Everybody thought Sir Nicholas was very generous, including that young man himself, who filed the bills neatly, and then felt quite under the impression that he had done all that was necessary.

Joanna had a diamond ring and an opal ring with rubies, and bangles and brooches innumerable, and at last spent a part

of her much built upon bee-money in buying a pipe rack and ash-stand for him, which she carved herself. People in love were certainly remarkably odd, and scarcely a day passed that her sense of humour did not threaten to become troublesome.

She had congratulations from everybody.

Miss Chester's were coupled with a certain friendly sense of envy. "Well, Joanna," she said, "so I hear you are going to be married?"

"Oh, no!" said Joanna, with energy.

"Isn't it true? Aren't you engaged to Sir Nicholas Osborne?"

"Oh, *engaged!*" said Joanna; "yes. But, as for being married, we are not thinking of that."

Then Polly came into her room mysteriously one evening, and said: "Please, Aunt Joanna, I don't want to be inquisitive, and don't tell me if you would rather not, but is Sir Nicholas in love with you?"

Mrs. Conway, on her part, showed quite a deference for her daughter, and would even have forgiven her defection had she attended no more Zenana meetings, but Joanna had become a model of contentment, and went to them all. She did not even grumble when Miss Chester's altar-cloth caused quite a revolution in the church, and the Conways, with a large assortment of other people, betook themselves to the Presbyterian meeting-house.

She admired Sir Nicholas immensely: his handsome face, his broad shoulders—above all, his riding. Joanna knew nothing about horses, but she could see that his riding was very different from the riding of anyone she knew.

Besides, Sir Nicholas' tales of his past nearly always redounded to his credit, and while some of them were true, some were only founded on fact.

Occasionally Joanna was inclined to think that his manner was a little too condescending, and that he was a little too much impressed with the idea that he was doing her an honour; but this was not often.

Once she said half-laughingly: "After all, Nicholas, you are not a prince of the blood royal"; but he was so much hurt at this that she apologised humbly.

So far as sentiments—and, indeed, intentions—went, Sir Nicholas was a model young man; and Joanna, being by no means a model young woman, was sometimes rather depressed by the distance between them.

One evening, after they had been engaged for about three weeks, she came up to her sister's room in a very disturbed state of mind.

Elizabeth was preparing to go to bed, and had got as far as her dressing-gown, in which she was sitting by the window,

brushing out her hair, which was long and soft and wavy, like Joanna's.

It was a hot day, and she had spent it on a sofa, reading novels, and had just finished one now, over which she was dreamily meditating. She was calm, tranquil, and rather sleepy, and her sister's entrance was very upsetting.

Joanna came in with shining eyes and quivering lips, and a restlessness all over her, banged the door in a manner which showed that the old Joanna was by no means dead, and, as Elizabeth's dress filled the only other chair in the room, she sat down upon the bed, drawing up her feet and leaning against the wall in a manner which was comfortable, if not elegant.

"Do be careful, Joanna," said Elizabeth pettishly; "you will make my bed all on one side. What is the matter?"

"Elizabeth," said Joanna, "Nicholas is too good for me."

"There are very few men who are too good for any respectable woman," said Elizabeth shortly.

"I know you always speak against men," said Joanna, "and I dare say you have cause, but——"

"Cause!" cried Elizabeth; "Joanna,"—rapping vehemently on the dressing-table with her hair brush to enforce her words,—"take my advice: never trust a man, not even a good man—and, by his eyes, Sir Nicholas is no saint."

"Of course he is no saint," said Joanna impatiently. "It would be terribly dull to be engaged to a saint; but I should not be engaged to him at all if I did not believe I could trust him entirely."

"Believe me," said Elizabeth, still impressive; "you know nothing about men. Joanna, I don't want such a cruel thing to happen to you as to me. Mother let me grow up—she saw me married—without a word—I knew *nothing*. It was wicked, and I can't tell you what I suffered when it all broke upon me at once. I want to tell you—I think I ought to talk to you——"

"Please don't, Elizabeth," said Joanna, jumping up. "Nicholas says what he likes about me is that I know nothing."

"Oh, I dare say—very likely," said Elizabeth, beginning to plait her hair. "But, take my advice, and don't trust him; he'll like you all the better for it."

Joanna might have been more impressed by her words had she been less accustomed to her sister's opinion of men.

Sir Nicholas shot on the Collards' mountain for a week after the 12th, during which he wrote to Joanna regularly.

To her, a little time to herself was a relief, to think over things and realise them, as she could not do in a constant state of excitement. And she was very, very glad to see him when he came back.

Times were decidedly changed for her. The Collards and the Kellys very often asked her over for tennis, and Sir Nicholas talked of making a court at the Lodge, as it was hopeless to expect that Mrs. Conway would consent to one. However, even Joanna had by this time discovered that Sir Nicholas talked of doing a great many things.

He set to work to teach her to ride on his second horse, instructions which were an agony to Joanna, who had never mounted a horse before, and never driven anything larger than a Shetland pony,

She was wretchedly, miserably nervous, though she did not confess it, and he was rather annoyed that her progress was not more rapid.

Sir Nicholas was decidedly popular in Ballylone. The farmers and poor people liked him, admired his handsome face and his readiness with a shilling. Mrs. Moreland, during the one visit Joanna insisted that he should pay in her little house off the street, was charmed with him; though, between his stutter and her deafness, she could not make out a word he said.

Miss Clarke was delighted to find that he agreed with everything she said, and would have been surprised if she had known that he had not listened to a word. Even Mrs. Conway, to whom he took more trouble to be civil, to a great extent approved of him. People generally did like Sir Nicholas.

Only Mrs. Chester was unfavourably impressed.

"I don't know how Joanna can stand that young fellow's airs and graces," she said to her daughter; "a selfish, conceited young man in my opinion, for all his good looks."

"Why, mamma," said Miss Chester, laughing, "if I said that, people would accuse me of being jealous."

But Joanna heard nothing but praise, and she was quite happy.

Sir Nicholas too was surprisingly, astonishingly content, with an occasional day's shooting and Joanna's companionship.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A man's character is like his shadow, which sometimes follows and sometimes precedes him, and which is occasionally longer, and occasionally shorter than he is."

IN September a wonderful thing happened: Mrs. Conway consented to allow Joanna to go to some country races about eight miles off, under the Chesters' chaperonage.

Sir Nicholas had a great deal to do with getting the whole

thing up. He was riding his own horse in the steeple-chase, and twice in flat races for the Collards, and he had declared that Joanna must come. He declared it to Mrs. Conway herself, who considered racing an invention of the evil one, and strange to say she gave way.

After which everything went right. Joanna had a dress from Derry now which she wore on grand occasions, and Mrs. Chester was the best of chaperons, and was quite content to be deposited on a seat and left there.

Sir Nicholas being immensely happy was thoroughly amiable; he told Joanna that he was proud of her; he was very attentive both to Mrs. Chester and to the Collards, who were there in a body; he even took the Collard girl with a squint, who was sitting alone and looking bored, to the paddock, which was a stretch on his part, as he disliked plain girls.

Nobody could deny that he looked uncommonly well when he rode out of the paddock among the rest—black, pink sleeves and cap.

He won the first race, was well placed in the second, and it was not till the steeple-chase that the unpleasantness occurred which spoiled the day for him.

He rode his own horse, a big handsome chestnut, a trifle hot-tempered, wearing his own colours, blue, white cap, and he beat his chief opponent, a young farmer who rode boldly, but without much science, by a couple of lengths.

So far well. He had just got out of his riding kit, and gone over to speak to Joanna and the Chesters, when his opponent came hastily up to him with a flushed face.

"That race wasn't fair run, Sir Nicholas," he said. "Gentleman you may call yourself, but you can hardly deny that the best horse didn't win."

Sir Nicholas drew himself up and stared. Something in his contemptuous attitude goaded the man to passion. He took a step forward. "It's not the first time," he said, "that I have heard tell you were rather too sharp a customer to have dealings with."

Sir Nicholas turned suddenly white.

"Come away, Lindsay, and hold your nonsense," said one of the men round.

"It's fair play I like to see——" began the man, but before he had got any further he had measured his length on the ground in front of the grand stand. By this time everybody had collected round the group, and Mr. Collard bustled to the front.

Lindsay got up, wiping the mud from his face, and evidently considerably impressed.

"I dar' him to say that his is the best horse," he muttered sulkily.

"I don't," said Sir Nicholas calmly ; "I only say that I am the better rider. You can neither manage your horse nor your temper."

"He's right at that," said another man ; "come away, Lindsay, you are only making a fool of yourself."

"What is all this nonsense about?" said Sir Nicholas.

"He's just put out at being beat, sir," said one. "He says you crossed him at the last fence, but I was at the place myself, and I can answer for it, it was a straight ridden race."

Sir Nicholas shrugged his shoulders and turned to Joanna; but the pleasure of the day was gone for him. He had ridden the race straight and won it easily, but his past record was not so absolutely clean that an attack of the kind could be a matter of indifference to him.

Joanna, who had been frightened at the time, could not understand why it weighed upon him so much, and said so when they left the Chesters, to walk up to Cliff House together.

"That's what comes of having anything to do with such low hounds," he said. "Of course I don't like it—who would? Joanna, *you* don't believe it?"

"My dear Nicholas, what will you ask me next?" said Joanna, with a laugh.

"Of course it is absurd. Joanna, here we are in the lane, and there isn't a soul about. Do sit down on the bank for a bit, and talk to me. I am rather down on my luck."

"Well, I must say I think that is absurd," said Joanna; "you can't really mind what a man like that says in a rage, and you know very well that I would believe nothing anybody could tell me against you."

"I am not such a good fellow as you think, darling," he said, with some hesitation. "Joanna, will you always try to remember the knock-about sort of life I have had? Tell me, how much could you forgive me, little one?"

"I could forgive you anything," said Joanna earnestly, "unless you were to stop caring for me."

"Anything?" he said. "Even if what that fellow said had been true——"

"Oh, no, not that," she said ; "because that—don't you understand?—it would change my idea of you altogether. It wouldn't be *you* any more. I couldn't forgive anything dishonourable."

"Ah," said Sir Nicholas, turning a little away from her. For a moment he had felt almost as if he could tell her anything and everything for the relief of getting it off his own mind. He let her hand go, and began his old habit of twisting his moustache.

"Are you vexed with me, dear, because I didn't say I could

forgive you anything?" said Joanna. "But you see it is such an impossible thing to happen."

"It's all right, darling," he said with an effort. "You are perfectly right, only I could forgive you anything without any exceptions. You will never care for me as I do for you."

Sir Nicholas was very much in earnest.

"My sweetheart, you must be my good angel, my good influence," he said.

"I will do my best to help you and be what you want," said Joanna very gravely.

Then they walked soberly up to the house together.

On the spur of this Sir Nicholas actually roused himself to write to his brother-in-law and ask if he could not get him employment of some kind, but with the writing of the letter his energy evaporated, and when he got a reply he never succeeded in writing again.

Lord Meredyth wrote, not unreasonably, for some further explanation of his brother-in-law's wishes, and for information as to his capabilities, but Sir Nicholas chose to be displeased at the letter.

"He has heaps of money, and could easily have offered me a post somewhere if he had chosen to take the trouble," he said.

But lucrative posts for a penniless young man of not unimpeachable character, and with no training or capabilities for anything in particular, are perhaps not exactly going a-begging.

Sir Nicholas grumbled a great deal, talked a great deal, and made fresh plans every day; but he never got any further.

He grumbled at not being able to marry, and then at Joanna because she declined to be unhappy in consequence.

And in the long autumn days Joanna grew into a love which was protecting as well as admiring.

"You are quite motherly to me," said he one day, laughing; and it was true.

She made fun of his conceit; she excused his changes of mood, his want of energy, and his selfishness, and wished that everyone else should think him perfect. She admired his riding, his handsome face, his good-nature, and many qualities which existed only in her own mind, and would not have exchanged him for anyone in the world.

Joanna had begun by being in love with love and excitement: by the end of the autumn she was in love with her lover.

CHAPTER XV.

"Is all our fire of shipwreck wood,
Oak and pine?
Oh, for the ills half understood,
The dim, dead woe
Long ago
Befallen this bitter coast of France!
Well, poor sailors took their chance,
I take mine."

It was a cold January day, and Joanna, who had been to pay the Clarkes a visit, was making her way home as quickly as she could, and trying to keep the end of her boa between her face and the wind. The consequence was that she almost collided with Sir Nicholas, who was coming round the corner from the post-office.

"Well, you *are* in a hurry!" he said.

"I am exceedingly cold," said Joanna briskly. "Come, let us go round by the road and walk quickly. I have just been to see the Clarkes,—you know mother and Miss Clarke have been in a state of feud for the last fortnight,—and between the coldness of Miss Clarke, and the coldness of her drawing-room, I am nearly frozen. Nicholas, can you believe it, she had got a very pretty arrangement of moss and snowdrops in her grate."

"I told you that that brown cloak is not warm enough for this weather," he said,

"And I told *you*, my dear boy, that I would put a knitted thing under it, but that in default of having any other I must wear it."

"I wish," said Sir Nicholas, "that I had a right to attend to your clothes, darling."

"I wish you had," agreed Joanna, who had heard the same speech many times before; "Nicholas dear, I *do* like that new cap of yours, and I am glad to see it doesn't flab in your hand when you take it off. Did you get any letters just now?"

"Only an invitation from young Kemble to go up to Dublin for some big dinners and dances."

"From young Kemble—that's the man who can break a poker on his arm, isn't it?" said Joanna, with interest. "Isn't he in the something Lancers? Oh, Nicholas, you must go: you might get some hunting."

"I dare say some of the fellows would mount me," he assented, "but I don't think I shall go, darling; where's the money to come from?"

"It wouldn't cost much," said Joanna sagely, "and you really do deserve some fun—you haven't been away more than a couple of days together all autumn."

Sir Nicholas took out the note and looked at it wistfully.

"I don't deny I should like to go, darling," he said—"that is, if you wouldn't mind."

"*Mind!* I should love it," said Joanna. "I should value you twice as much when I got you back, dear, and besides I should like to hear some news from the outer world."

"But there's this to be thought of, Joanna," he said, knocking bits off the dry hedge with his stick as they passed: "It's a rowdy sort of regiment, with a good deal of hard play. Some of the fellows go in for baccarat and so on, and they will expect me to play."

"Then they must just be disappointed," said Joanna calmly, "I shall not be a bit afraid, darling. You shall promise me, and you shall write to me every day and tell me what you are doing. I should love you to have some really good hunting."

"I am not at all sure that I had not better keep clear of that lot," said Sir Nicholas, with hesitation, but a very evident desire to be persuaded.

"I am not a bit afraid," said Joanna, "I can trust you, and I don't want you to stay in this place till you get tired of me and it. Nicholas, there isn't a soul about, and I am so cold; race me to the avenue gate?"

Sir Nicholas went to Dublin.

Joanna took the greatest interest in his arrangements, his packing, the clothes he should or should not take, and the various tales of his exploits in the hunting field with which he regaled her.

He went off in high delight, and having gone, he evidently enjoyed himself, for he stayed away for nearly three weeks.

He wrote to Joanna, long regular letters for the first ten days, and she went about with a happy face, rather to the scandal of the neighbourhood.

Miss Chester even said to her: "Why, Joanna, you look as if you were glad to get rid of Sir Nicholas. I expected to see you in the depths of despair."

"That would be very absurd," said Joanna, laughing. "Nicholas writes to me every day, and sometimes twice a day, and he is having such a glorious time. He has had some splendid days with the hounds."

"I wonder you approve of his having a glorious time without you," said Miss Chester.

During the last week Sir Nicholas' letters became all at once irregular, and dwindled into mere scraps, but Joanna held her head high, told nobody when her visit to the post-office was a failure, and declined to allow herself to be disappointed.

He returned quite unexpectedly.

He walked into the drawing-room one evening after dinner, when Joanna was alone there, finishing her detested practising in the cold, by the light of a solitary candle. The rest of the family were economically sitting over the dining-room fire.

"Ten minutes more," said Joanna to herself, with a sigh; and then, hearing the door open, she turned round and saw her lover.

"Nicholas!" she cried, jumping up.

He was excited, dusty, and not in evening dress. After the first moment she noticed something amiss.

"What is the matter, dear?" she said.

He took her suddenly and passionately in his arms.

"There's plenty the matter, darling," he said. "I have lost a lot of money, and that's not the worst of it; but, after all, what do I care now?" he said, with an excited laugh. "Are you glad to see me again, darling? You won't refuse me *anything* this evening, will you?"

"What is wrong, dear? do tell me," said Joanna anxiously. Sir Nicholas' whole manner was so strange, so different.

"Nothing at all, sweetheart, only I am a little excited to-night. You must be good to me—I have been going it rather strong the last two nights."

Joanna twisted herself out of his arms.

"Nicholas," she said piteously, "what do you mean? You are so queer this evening."

He laughed again.

"Come here, darling," he said, with an odd look in his blue eyes. "I have something to tell you that I can only whisper."

Joanna came obediently, but with rather hesitating footsteps.

Sir Nicholas drew her to him, and bent over her.

"Darling," he said in a solemn whisper, "never take your liquors mixed—it's a great mistake."

Then he burst out laughing; and Joanna, now thoroughly frightened, struggled to free herself. Was he going mad? She would not allow another horrid suspicion to come into her head.

"Let me go—let me go!" she begged.

"Very well, you shall go if you want," said Sir Nicholas, releasing her. "You are welcome to go"—in a shaken voice—"if you don't care for me, if you are aren't willing to give up anything for me. I *did* think you loved me."

"Oh, Nicholas, I do love you!" said poor Joanna.

"You don't prove it very well," he said solemnly.

Only a sort of instinct kept Joanna rooted to her corner; he must know the difference between right and wrong better than she, but still—

"Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do?" she cried.

"And you can't expect me to love a girl who does not trust me," he said. He looked very handsome, very passionate, very angry, standing a little way from her with folded arms.

"Oh, Nicholas! you *do* love me!" she said entreatingly.

"I am sorry to say I do," he answered sternly. "But not as much as I did before—never as much again."

Joanna made a half movement toward him, then she suddenly shrank back and burst into tears. "Oh, I am so miserable!" she said. "Oh, darling, *please* love me—it is not my fault."

Sir Nicholas had never seen her cry before, and his offended dignity vanished in a breath.

"You little goose!" he said, and held her to him with passionate loving words.

"And you do forgive me!" she said humbly.

"Of course I do, my own sweetheart, and of course you are going to be good to me," he said, looking into her face and speaking with quivering lips.

Was the whole thing to begin over again? Never was Joanna more thankful for her sister than when Mrs. Morris opened the door just now and came in.

"Joanna, do you know that it is late?" she said. "Sir Nicholas, my father says that if you feel inclined for a smoke, he will be very glad if you will go to the dining-room."

The other two pulled themselves together with an effort, and listened vaguely to a slight description of Mrs. Morris' ailments.

But on the stairs going up to bed, she looked at Joanna and said:

"What is the matter with that young man to-night?"

"What should be the matter?" said Joanna snappishly; and then she hurried off to her own room to be exceedingly miserable.

She was disturbed; her faith in Sir Nicholas was shaken; she did not know what had been the matter with her or with him; she was not even sure that she had been in the right. Would he be more like his old self in the morning? She felt vaguely that something had been wrong with him that evening. She wondered if he really meant that he would never love her so much again, and if he had really doubted that she cared for him. How much more patient he had been in the days when she in truth did not care.

She had an idea that things would come right in the morning.

Sir Nicholas came over at about eleven, when Joanna, under Mrs. Conway's superintendence, was hearing Polly's German verbs, an occupation which was mutually detested.

He was very grave, but gracious. Polly, knowing what great latitude was permissible when he was there, jumped down from her chair, and clambered on his knee, putting her arms round his neck.

"I was awake when you came last night," she said, "and I wanted mamma to bring you up."

"Don't throttle me, like a good child," he said. "Mrs. Conway, I have come to carry off Joanna, if I may; I want to talk to her."

"Well, I suppose she can go," said Mrs. Conway fairly graciously, "but I don't advise you to go out; I am sure it is going to snow."

"But you needn't imagine you are to escape, Miss Polly," said Sir Nicholas; "I shall expect to hear that verb this evening, compound tenses and all."

"They are much the easiest, because they go with 'habe,'" said Polly, unwillingly sliding down from Sir Nicholas' knee. "Will you tell me a story after dinner?"

"Perhaps, if you are very immaculate," said he. "Will you come, Joanna?"

"I shall look *that* out in the dictionary too," said Polly indignantly, "so you will learn it is no use using big words that I don't understand."

"Polly, don't be impertinent," said Mrs. Conway, and Polly instantly subsided.

Sir Nicholas and Joanna walked gravely out into the hall.

"Come into the drawing-room," he said; "I have a lot to say to you."

"There is no fire," said Joanna, hesitating.

"Get a shawl then, dear; I shall not be cold," he said.

He was on his knees lighting the fire when she came back, with a recklessness of Mrs. Conway's feelings which alarmed Joanna.

She laid her hand on his fair hair very gently, and then stooped to kiss him.

"You have most undoubtedly been having your hair cut, dear," she said.

"Don't you like it? There, I think that fire will burn, and my hands aren't particularly smutty, are they, little one?"

He got up as he spoke, looking at Joanna very gravely.

"Come and sit by the fire," he said, wheeling in a chair, "I am going to get a stool and to confess to you; are you going to forgive me, darling?"

Joanna held his hand very tightly, but said nothing.

"Dear," he said, with his head turned away, "I hate to speak to you about last night, but I must. Will you forgive me? I don't remember much that I said, but I know I was a brute."

"Oh, no," said she softly.

"The fact of the matter is, I was excited, and I had had quite as many whiskeys and sodas as were good for me, and I was so cold when I got in that I took a couple of glasses of wine on the top of that."

Joanna did not draw away her hand, but she started and shivered.

"You mustn't think that I drink," he said hastily. "Darling, I was worried and vexed. I *wish* you had not urged me to go to Dublin."

"I am so sorry," said Joanna, in a low voice.

"I have lost nearly six hundred pounds. Two hundred went in one morning over a horse of Kemble's I had backed myself to ride against another man. The brute had no mouth whatever, and galloped straight out of the course."

"Six hundred pounds!" exclaimed Joanna, in utter dismay. Such a sum seemed to her absolutely hopeless.

"Yes, and I broke my promise to you, and gambled; that's all I can tell you, but I did worse too, at least, what seems to me worse."

"Six hundred pounds!" repeated Joanna, "and where are you to get it from?"

"I got it and paid it at once—they were debts of honour," he explained. "I drew a check on Cox's, and they cashed it all right, but they wrote to tell me that I have overdrawn largely, and they can't do any more. When a fellow plays perfectly straight it is rather hard luck to have everything go dead against him."

He felt it rather hard that neither Joanna nor Providence should give him any thanks for playing absolutely straight, but as the idea of anything else never entered her head she was naturally not very much impressed by this.

"Are you angry with me, darling?" he said; "can't you forgive me?"

"I am very sorry," said Joanna, thoughtfully smoothing his already extremely smooth hair, "very, very sorry, dear; but there is no question of being angry or forgiving between you and me: we must just think what is best to be done."

"I can never forgive myself for last night," he said.

"I wish I had understood; I wish I had sent you away at once," said Joanna.

"I wish you had, but more than all, I wish you had not advised me to go to Dublin," he said, with a certain amount of reproach in his tone.

"I am very sorry," said Joanna humbly.

Somehow or other she began to feel herself in the wrong.

"And look here, darling, I am going to write to Meredyth this very minute, to say I will take *anything*," said Sir

Nicholas. "I can't do without my guardian angel any longer than I can help, and I don't mind roughing it a bit for you. Give me a kiss and see if you can get me a sheet of paper, and an envelope, and a stamp, and you shall help me with the letter."

Joanna got up, put her arms round his neck, and kissed him gravely.

But she could not regain her spirits as he did.

Why had she not tried to understand him better, to be of more use to him? The trouble and shame had slipped lightly from his shoulders to hers, and to her, with suddenly uprooted faith and opened eyes, everything appeared much worse than it really was. Of course she had known that men drank and gambled, but it had never come home to her before. And then, six hundred pounds! To Joanna, who had taken so long to make up thirteen, it seemed enormous.

It distressed her much when later in the day Sir Nicholas presented her with a set of pearl and gold butterfly brooches.

However he was quite at peace with himself again when they parted.

CHAPTER XVI.

"C'est demain, c'est demain qu'on lance
Qu'on lance mon navire aux flots;
L'onde en l'appelant se balance,
Devant le prone; amis, silence!
Ne chantez pas, gaie matelota.

"Demain je quitte le rivage
Où dormit long temps mon radeau;
Là-bas m'attend plus d'un orage,
Plus d'un combat, quelque naufrage
Sur un banc de sable à fleur d'eau."

"THERE is Sir Nicholas," said Polly. "Shall we wait for him?"

"We may as well," said Joanna. "He can walk up with us."

Cliff House butter had run short, and she and Polly had gone down to buy some at McCracken's.

It was a bright, frosty morning, and Joanna was feeling rather cold in her despised brown cloak. She and Polly had run all the way down to the village, but they could not run up, in consequence of the butter.

There was a good deal of frozen snow on the ground, and icicles hung from the thatch of the cottages.

"Why, Nicholas," said Joanna, as he came up to them, "you have got your most imposing manner on to-day. Do

oblige me, dear boy, by looking a little more fit for common people like Polly and me to associate with."

There certainly *was* something about Sir Nicholas this morning which was more characteristic of Joanna's first acquaintance with him than was usual now, but he laughed and said :

"Is it any marvel that I look a little proud and conscious when I tell you that Miss Clarke has just presented me with the very first crocus of the year."

"I little knew you had so excellent a reason," said Joanna, laughing, "but as I don't approve of airs, and as apparently you are not going to offer, may I ask you to carry the butter?"

"I beg your pardon," said Sir Nicholas, at once, "I was thinking of something else, to tell you the truth. Joanna, you remember I wrote to Meredyth a week ago? Well, instead of hearing from him to-day, I have had a letter from my sister."

"And what does she say?" said Joanna. "Polly, you will upset Sir Nicholas and the butter if you go on like that; the roads are very slippery."

Polly, with a hand of each of her companions, was amusing herself by occasional abrupt slides, which she enjoyed more than Sir Nicholas and Joanna did.

"It's a very civil letter I must say," he said. "She writes that Meredyth would be glad to see me to talk over things, and wants to know if I would go over next week, and if you would go too."

"I go—to Merevale?"

Joanna stood still on the road, and gazed at him with wide eyes.

"That's what she says," returned Sir Nicholas. "What do you think of it? Would you like to go?"

"Oh, I should like it better than anything!" said Joanna ecstatically.

To go to unknown England, among unknown people, with Nicholas : to plunge into a totally different life, with totally different people, where all sorts of exciting things were sure to happen—it was for this she had longed all her life.

"Then I suppose I had better say yes," said he. "Judith says she will then write to you."

"Don't you want to go?" said Joanna anxiously. "You know in any case I am perfectly happy here with you."

"I want to go, right enough," said Sir Nicholas, "but my hesitation is about you. It is not precisely the house I care to take you to. But after all I shall be there to look after you, so I don't see that it matters much."

Joanna listened breathlessly, while her fate hung in the balance.

It must be confessed that Sir Nicholas' doubt by no means lessened her desire to go.

Sir Nicholas was considering how much against him was likely to be public, and if he would run much risk of unpleasant meetings. He thought about Joanna too; was Merevale the sort of house where it was good to bring the girl he wanted to make his wife? If it was nothing else, might not some of the acquaintances she made there be an inconvenience? But then he could not afford to be uncharitable, and he would be there to look after her, and in fact he would like her to go, if it was for nothing but to see him at his best.

"I don't see why you should not go, darling, if you like," he said, heedless of Polly's wide open ears.

"Oh, Nicholas," said Joanna, with enthusiasm, "it will be perfect happiness!"

But there was a good deal to be done before the perfect happiness could be attained. First Mr. Conway, and then his wife, had to be brought to consent, with the help of a very civil note from Lady Meredyth; and not even a countess' letter could conquer Mrs. Conway's objection to letting Joanna travel alone with Sir Nicholas.

Mr. Conway agreed with her there, and the whole plan was very nearly shipwrecked, when it was discovered that Mrs. Moreland was crossing to England on the 8th, and could at least chaperon Joanna from Belfast to Fleetwood.

Whereupon an acceptance was despatched to Lady Meredyth, Joanna was relieved from alternations of hope and fear, and Mrs. Conway and Miss Clarke had a quarrel, which lasted a week, over the proper direction of a letter to a countess.

There was a great deal to do. For the next ten days Joanna almost lived with the dressmaker, and got three dresses and all her hats in Derry. Sir Nicholas was exceedingly particular, and took as much interest in her clothes as she did herself, with a great deal more knowledge.

Then Joanna's bees had to be put under the solemn charge of Richard O'Brien, and her hens made over temporarily to Polly, who was very anxious and so much impressed with her responsibilities that she bore her aunt's departure better than she would otherwise have done. Everybody in the village had to be bidden a solemn good-bye, and the Conway trunks had all to be made over to the traveller.

Miss Chester was frankly jealous, Mrs. Morris less openly so.

Joanna herself was too utterly happy and excited to have any regrets. She lost her appetite completely, and could neither sleep nor sit down.

Something was going to happen, and something good it must be—she had no apprehensions.

But she had never spent such an endless, crawling ten days in her life, even though Sir Nicholas was there.

The 8th came at last, and Joanna's last farewells were said carelessly and joyfully. They all came to see her off at the station; Mrs. Conway gave her some good advice, of which she heard not a word, and Mr. Conway presented her with a five-pound note, which overwhelmed her with a sense of riches.

Sir Nicholas said: "Now, Joanna, if you fuss I will have nothing to say to you. Leave your boxes to me."

And though a hat-box of hers and a portmanteau of his were lost for days in consequence, she refrained from triumphing.

Mrs. Moreland was a capital chaperon, being so deaf that she was no restraint at all, and as she went to bed immediately they got on board ship, and parted from them at Fleetwood, they did not see much of her.

They had a long railway journey before them, and as they got nearer and nearer their destination they both began to get nervous for different reasons.

They were comfortable enough outwardly. They had a hot-water tin for their feet, an assortment of rugs, and the carriage to themselves for a good part of the way.

Joanna was deeply interested by the window at first, with a certain disappointment to find England so extremely like Ireland, but a hope that Berkshire and Merevale would be more different. Nicholas was full of the pleasure of having her so completely to himself, and was at his very best. But as the day drew on, the consciousness of her new blue travelling dress failed to support Joanna, and Sir Nicholas too grew very thoughtful and silent.

"Joanna," he said, "whatever happens, you won't throw me over for other fellows, will you? I tell you beforehand I couldn't stand it."

"I don't like to make rash promises," said Joanna, with a brightness which was just then a little forced. "I must be allowed to console myself if you desert me for Lady Florence Delacque."

"I should be a great fool if I did," he returned gravely. "I should simply go headlong to the devil. You wouldn't give me up for a madness like that, would you, darling?"

"Anxious as I am to oblige you, I couldn't well insist on your sticking to me against your will," said Joanna. "If our engagement was broken off I should just meekly return your presents and go home, a blighted being."

She laughed at the thought of such an utterly impossible contingency, but Sir Nicholas did not laugh.

"Don't speak like that, my sweetheart," he said passion-

ately ; " I can't bear to hear you. If you loved me as well as I love you, you couldn't even speak of our engagement being broken off."

" It is just because I am so sure that it couldn't happen," said Joanna softly.

CHAPTER XVII.

" Some fell to dance ; some fell to hazardry ;
Some to make love ; some to make merriment."

" HERE we are at last," said Sir Nicholas. " Can't you see the house through the trees ?"

" Why, it seems to be miles away," said Joanna, holding his hand tightly under the rug. " What a long avenue ! Do we cross the river ?"

They were driving up from the station in a waggonette which had been sent to meet them. Joanna had had a vague hope that Lady Meredyth would have come herself, which would have made the first arrival less alarming.

" This avenue is a good two miles long," said Sir Nicholas, who saw with a certain pleasure that Joanna was impressed. " It's a lovely place, and Meredyth is a lucky fellow. He had a capital time of it knocking about the world as aide-de-camp to different people, till his father died a couple of years ago, and then he had nothing to do but to come home and settle down and marry."

There was much envy in Sir Nicholas' tone. What credit was it to his brother-in-law to have gone through the world liked and thought well of, when he had never had any temptation ?

" But your sister," said Joanna, " will she like me, do you think ? Is she very alarming ?"

" She'll like you, of course, you little goose," he said ; " but you mustn't expect her to pay much attention to you, because the house will be full, and besides, Judith is completely a man's woman. Everybody looks out for him or herself at Merevale."

" To tell you the truth, Nicholas," said Joanna, hesitating, " I am feeling a little shy."

" You shy ? Nonsense !" he returned. " Look, dear, isn't the bridge pretty ?"

" And the river, and the trees—everything is lovely," agreed Joanna, " but it is all so *big* !"

Round the next corner the house again came into view, a great straggling, irregular building, with all sorts of odd angles and corners.

"Why," said Joanna, in dismay, "it is as big as the Shelbourne hotel!"

Whereupon Sir Nicholas incontinently burst out laughing.

Then they drew up at the door, where a couple of footmen, and only a couple of footmen, came to receive them.

Joanna stood rather forlornly upon the steps, while Sir Nicholas gave a few directions about the luggage. She was tired and over-excited; she had a headache, and felt absurdly inclined to cry. She wanted Mrs. Morris, or Polly, or even her mother, and was desperately afraid of losing sight of Sir Nicholas. So much so, that, when one of the footmen said that her ladyship had told him to ask if they would rather go to their rooms or join the rest in her ladyship's sitting-room, she preferred, tired and travel-stained as she was, to make her hostess' acquaintance at once with him, to the risk of having to make it later alone.

In which Joanna was very unwise.

So they crossed the hall, and were ushered through a passage and a couple of rooms till they came to an open doorway, sheltered by a heavy curtain and a mousherabeyeh screen. There was a hum of many voices, hushed for a moment by their entrance, and then breaking out again in a welcome to Sir Nicholas. In that moment his doubts and fears as to his reception were at an end.

Joanna stood still, absolutely bewildered. It was getting dusk, and the room was a dark one, and seemed to be full of people, all talking at once, and most of them apparently very intimate with Sir Nicholas.

"Well, Nick," said one girl, with very short petticoats and a loud voice, "do you feel like Rip Van Winkle? Come to me to put you up to all the latest tips."

"You haven't been shot by moonlighters or grown a beard?" said another.

"He's done worse," said a pink-and-white young man in a shooting coat.

Nobody took any notice of Joanna just at first, as she stood aside, feeling, all at once, very plain and shabby in her blue serge.

Most of the ladies were in teagowns, and a few in shirts, covert coats, and short petticoats seemed to have just come in. The men, who were few, were all in shooting coats and knickerbockers.

Sir Nicholas seemed to have fallen into his right place as if by magic, but Joanna, in her Ballylone made serge, which she had secretly admired so much, felt herself suddenly and miserably aloof, even from him.

A squarely built, rather short young man was the first to pay any attention to her. She had thought him plain, till he

turned to her with a smile, disclosing an excellent row of teeth.

"May I introduce myself?" he said. "Judith, this is Miss Conway."

A faded, but still pretty lady in a light blue silk teagown rose leisurely from her chair, and held out her hand indifferently to Joanna.

"I am very glad to see you, Miss Conway," she said, in a slow voice. "Nick should have introduced you, but you must excuse him; he is engrossed with his old friends."

Joanna drew herself up indignantly: it was not for any third person to make excuses for Nicholas to her.

"You have had a long journey, and I am sure you are tired," said the square young man.

"And so I shall take you at once to your room," said the lady in the blue teagown, whom she perforce concluded must be Lady Meredyth.

Joanna had all this time been silent, with an irrational choking feeling in her throat, but she threw one pleading, imploring look in Sir Nicholas' direction as she left the room. If he would only look at her and give her courage!

But Sir Nicholas had his back to her, so, as she said to herself indignantly, how was it possible he could know she wanted encouragement?

She was not going to show herself a fool and a coward at the very beginning, she resolved, as she followed Lady Meredyth upstairs and through labyrinths of passages. Joanna had to keep some distance behind her hostess to avoid treading on the blue silk train, which she nevertheless did twice in her nervousness, and she was relieved when Lady Meredyth ushered her into one of a row of numbered rooms.

"I hope you will be comfortable here," she said, in the soft, slow voice, which, somehow, reminded Joanna of Sir Nicholas'. "There are rather a noisy crew in this passage, and I dare say you had better lock your door, if you don't care for midnight revelry. I will send a maid, if you have not brought one."

"Oh, thank you!" said Joanna.

"I dare say you will be glad to have a rest before dressing for dinner; I will send you up some tea. Dinner is at eight."

Lady Meredyth did not take much trouble to conceal that her sole wish was to get Joanna comfortably disposed of for the time. She considered that she had already obliged her husband by being much more gracious than was at all necessary.

She turned to leave the room, but Joanna felt too forlorn and frightened to let herself be deserted like this.

"Where—where is Nicholas' room?" she said, and then

she would have given anything to have unsaid the words when she saw the amusement in Lady Meredyth's eyes.

"Nick? Oh, I am sure I don't know," she answered, with a laugh.

Joanna shut her mouth tight, and said nothing more.

When she was alone, she sat down on her bed, feeling very much inclined to cry.

"Well," she said to herself, "I am a fool! Didn't I beg, entreat, and implore to be allowed to come, and feel perfectly happy at the thought of it; and now, before I have been half an hour in the house, I wish myself back at Ballylone! And why? For no reason but silliness. Lady Meredyth has been quite kind; and if she hadn't, I am not going to be afraid of a girl very little older than I am, I hope; and the young man with the smile was very nice. As for Nicholas, it would have been very odd if he had not spoken to old friends he has not seen for a year; and it certainly was not my clothes he fell in love with in the first instance."

Whereupon she dried her eyes, and decided that it would be too silly if she was miserable because the house was big and full of people, and Nicholas was called Nick.

She did not lie down to rest; she wandered round her room, inspected its comforts, discovered with felicity that she had a balcony, and began a letter home on coroneted paper. She wrote very cheerfully, and said that Lady Meredith had been very kind, and that the house was full of people.

Then the maid, a tall, beautifully dressed young person, came, and Joanna, strongly against her will, let her unpack, and was almost inclined to ask her what she had better wear for dinner.

She refrained, however, and decided on a white silk, which was a Derry production, and therefore inspired her with more confidence than if it had come from Ballylone.

She took a good look at herself in her long glass before she started to find her way to the drawing-room. Her dress was plain, but it suited her, and fitted her well, thanks to Sir Nicholas' criticisms. Her pretty, fuzzy brown hair was twisted quaintly round her head, her headache was gone, and altogether Joanna knew she looked as well as she had it in her to look.

She was almost pretty, and looked very fresh and young when after many wanderings she opened the drawing-room door, and found herself once more in public.

It was a big, heavily furnished room, with groups of people dotted about in all directions. Sir Nicholas, to whom her eyes went straight as if by instinct, was leaning over a pretty, lively girl, playing with her fan, but he came over to Joanna at once.

"Well, dear," he said, "are you rested? Come over to the fire; I want to introduce you to Lady Hilda West, and Mrs. Kestrell and some of the others."

Joanna looked at him with grateful eyes.

Till dinner was announced she was perfectly happy. Sir Nicholas introduced her to a good many people, but he stood beside her all the time, and then the young man with the fascinating smile came up and spoke to her, and turned out to be her host.

"No strangers to-night," said Lady Meredyth, "so we go in according to choice."

This was all very well if she had remembered that Joanna, at any rate, was a stranger.

Sir Nicholas took a half step toward her, when a pretty girl in a very low pink dress, to whom she had been introduced as Lady Hilda West, intervened.

"Now, Nick, you are not going to entirely desert old friends, are you?" she said. "I am sure Miss Conway will excuse you if you take me into dinner, and you won't repent it, I assure you: I have all the latest scandal at my fingers ends."

"I shouldn't repent it if you didn't say a word all dinner," said Sir Nicholas promptly. "Look here, Dawley, will you take Miss Conway? Lord Dawley—Miss Conway."

"May I?" said Lord Dawley, looking extremely disgusted.

He was a fat young man, with a marvellously pink and white complexion, and having seated Joanna he apparently considered he had done all that was necessary. He had wanted to take in Mrs. Kestrell, and had brought Joanna into the dining-room almost at a run, with a view to getting a seat next to the object of his adoration; having failed he sullenly devoted himself to his dinner. He was too young himself to have any taste for an *ingénue*, as he considered his new acquaintance, and besides his general conversation was of the most limited description.

On the other side of Joanna was a man who was entirely engrossed with his neighbour, so she had plenty of time to look about and observe.

The room was big, like everything about Merevale, with panelled walls, and high, stained windows. Very dark and gloomy it must be by daylight, she decided, but just now it was brilliantly lighted up, and there were roaring fires, so it looked warm and comfortable enough. High up at one corner was an empty band-stand.

The table was arranged entirely in pink: pink roses, pink lampshades, and pink ribbons.

Sir Nicholas was sitting just in sight of Joanna if she leaned forward; he was pulling his moustache, and looked amused

and animated, the handsomest man there, she proudly thought.

But she was heartily tired of the dinner and her sullen companion before it was over, and very glad to leave the room in Lady Meredyth's train.

In the drawing-room once more it was a little awkward.

Everyone but Joanna seemed to have her own particular set of friends. She sat down vaguely near Lady Meredyth, and tried at first to look as if the conversation interested her, and to smile at the right places; but they talked of people she knew nothing about, and she only felt herself in the way. She drew back a little, and took up that last refuge of the destitute, a photograph book.

"You look very dull," said a loud friendly voice near her.

She looked up; Lady Hilda West had sauntered across the room to her, and sat down on the sofa beside her.

"Nick asked me to see that you were not left out in the cold," she said cheerfully; "he knows Judith's little ways."

"It is all right," said Joanna, "but you see I don't know the people they are talking about."

She was so grateful to her new friend that she refused to see her exceedingly low dress, which had amazed her before.

"I'll give you a hint or two," said Lady Hilda. "Put you up to a few of the people here. In the first place don't ever depend upon Judith. She doesn't think a woman worth the trouble of speaking to, and she is jealous of every girl who is young."

"Oh, hush!" said Joanna, in distress, "she is sure to hear you."

"It's all one to me if she does. She was a beauty once, and she can't retire gracefully."

"And who is the very pretty girl she is talking to?" said Joanna, not because she wanted to know, but because these strictures on Lady Meredyth made her uncomfortable, and she did not feel equal to reproof.

"That," said Lady Hilda, lowering her voice ever so little, "is Mrs. Kestrell. She was married out of the courts, and she drinks like a fish. She isn't received everywhere, but this is Liberty Hall."

Joanna had not the dimmest idea what marriage out of the courts meant, but dimly connected it with Windsor and the queen.

"Drinks—that girl?" she said.

"Indeed she does; she has to be carried to bed every night."

"Oh, how horrible!" said Joanna, looking at the pretty girlish face with fascinated disgust.

"I can tell you something about most people, even about Nick," said Lady Hilda, with a laugh. "What did you think

of your neighbour at dinner? Wonderful complexion, hasn't he?"

"I never saw anybody with such an extraordinary colour; I felt quite sorry for him," said Joanna.

"You needn't have pitied him," returned Lady Hilda, with a laugh; "he admires it very much himself, and in fact puts it on fresh every day."

"Do you mean that he *paints*—a man paints?" said Joanna.

"Oh, you'll learn a few funny things here," said Lady Hilda; "among others that Nick will not approve of your having too much to say to me."

"Oh, I hope not!" said Joanna, a little embarrassed.

"It's true enough, I assure you," said her companion calmly. "Now, Miss Conway, here come the men; just oblige me by looking at Judith."

And Lady Hilda calmly raised a long-handled eye-glass and surveyed her hostess.

Lady Meredyth had been languidly leaning back in her chair, exchanging an occasional remark with Mrs. Kestrell, and making no effort to conceal her boredom. The change was like lightning: she gave a hasty pat to her hair, changed her attitude, and became smiling, gracious, and inviting.

Lord Meredyth and Sir Nicholas both came over to where the two girls were sitting.

"Miss Conway," Lord Meredyth said, "Osborne tells me you don't hunt, otherwise I should have been more than happy to give you a mount for to-morrow."

"Where is the meet?" said Sir Nicholas.

"Near the Dingle hill," said Lady Hilda; "we are all going to breakfast at Rosshalton."

"Nearly everybody goes, so I am sorry you do not hunt, Miss Conway," said Lord Meredyth. "I am afraid you will find it rather dull."

But Joanna, with delighted eyes, said she did not think so.

"Joanna," said Sir Nicholas, in a low voice, "I think you had better go to bed. You are tired, and I am sure nobody else will go for hours."

"I should like it," said Joanna, "if Lady Meredyth won't think it rude."

"Come on, then; I will see you on your way," he returned kindly enough.

"Hallo, Nick, where are you off to?" said Lady Hilda.

"Come and give us a song before the little gamble begins. I suppose you are not up in the latest, and haven't even heard of 'The Golden Hair was Hanging down her Back.'"

"I'll prove to you I am not so utterly behind the times as you think, in about ten minutes," said Sir Nicholas.

Joanna allowed herself to be taken out of the drawing-room

very gladly; to have Nicholas to herself even for five minutes after this bewildering day was restful.

"You look very sweet, my pet," he said, quite as tenderly as she could wish. "Have you had a very deadly evening?"

"Oh, no!" said Joanna, clinging to his arm, as they crossed the hall. "Lady Hilda West was awfully kind."

"She is a very good-natured girl, darling, but I am not very keen for your seeing much of her," said Sir Nicholas; "she's an awful romp, and she absolutely doesn't care what she does. I don't want to see you like any one of the women here."

"Not even like Lady Florence Delacque?" said Joanna mischievously,

"Certainly not," he said hastily; "but she isn't here now. Hilda West is her sister."

"Oh, then, I must take an interest in her," said Joanna. "Nicholas, I am so glad there is to be a meet to-morrow. I do hope it will be a good day."

"You won't be lonely, will you?" he said. "Come down early and see us off if you can, and then I will introduce you to any stay-at-home who happens to turn up. I dare say somebody will drive over, and then you could come."

"I shall have a capital time," said Joanna. "Good-night, dear; you had better go back to the others—I shall find my way all right."

Sir Nicholas sauntered back to the drawing-room rather thoughtfully. Lady Meredyth looked up when he entered, with a slight smile.

"Well, Nick," she said carelessly, "perhaps having seen your *protégée* safely away you will condescend to relax a little."

Sir Nicholas flushed rather angrily, and sank into a chair beside his sister.

"I must say I had no idea that she was your style," Lady Meredyth added. "I should fancy you might attend to her dresses a little with advantage. I suppose you have forsworn racing, cards, and all such temptations of the Evil One?"

"I am not going to play to-night at any rate," said Sir Nicholas shortly; "I am going to the billiard-room."

"Have you heard that Florence Delacque is coming here after next week?" said Lady Meredyth, with intention.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Rode out on a day,
Saddled and bridled
And gallant to see."

SIR NICHOLAS undoubtedly admired himself very much as he sauntered through the hall next morning, in his well-fitting red coat and spotless breeches.

His moustache had reached its last stage of perfection, his manner was at its very height, and he carried his hunting crop under his arm as he leisurely buttoned his gloves.

He was a very handsome, well-made young man, and he was quite aware of the fact. His spirits were at the highest, with the prospect of a good run, and he was at peace with himself, which with him meant being at peace with all the world.

Last night he had been just a little annoyed with Joanna for not doing more credit to his choice, for looking shy and out of place and being unable to hold her own, but at the same time he felt that his annoyance was unjust.

Nobody had envied him, and he liked to be envied. At Ballylone Joanna was in her way an important person, but here she was nobody; just a countrified little girl, with no style of her own, and no way of collecting a crowd of admirers round her.

Sir Nicholas dimly felt that he was throwing himself away, but he knew that he had been very good to Joanna all the same, and he was pleased with himself.

This morning, not even the fact that she was standing all alone in the hall waiting for him, while the others were together in groups, had power to disturb his equanimity.

He greeted her, and then sauntered leisurely from group to group, meditating who was to have the honour of driving in the tandem with him to breakfast at Rosshalton.

Finally he decided that Lady Hilda should be so far favoured, simply because he heard Lord Dawley and Mr. Kestrell putting forward joint claims to her company.

Lady Hilda was a very popular girl among a certain set of men; she was as good as a married woman they said, up to anything, and a girl before whom you need not trouble to be on your "p's" and "q's."

The compliment was a rather dubious one, but the fact remained that she had always a train of admirers, and though she was not Sir Nicholas' style at all, it pleased him to take her away from the rest.

All the men and most of the ladies were in pink, and made

a very bright spot of colour as they stood on the steps waiting for the start. Some were riding to Rosshalton, some going on the coach.

It was a glorious morning, with a light northerly breeze, and a few clouds straying about a blue sky ; a day to raise anybody's spirits.

Sir Nicholas tucked the warm rug round himself and his companion, gave her hand a distinct pressure, and looked at her with so much expression in his eyes that she laughed. It was not that he particularly admired Lady Hilda, it was merely force of habit, and one way of expressing his spirits.

"It is odd to think of you as a sedate, engaged man, Nick," said Lady Hilda, with a laugh ; one little peculiarity of hers was that she always called men by their Christian names.

"Poor little thing," she added ; "I wish she had been able to come."

It annoyed Sir Nicholas to hear the girl he was engaged to spoken of as a poor little thing, and he showed it.

"It's rather rude of you to pity her," he said, with a little more than his usual stammer.

"You would rather I was consumed with envy, wouldn't you, my dear boy ?" said Lady Hilda, with her loud laugh ; "but there are several reasons against that, and one is that I am ready to bet you two dozen pairs of gloves against one that you never marry her."

"Done!" said Sir Nicholas. "Have a cigarette ?"

Lady Hilda accepted, but she did not at once change the subject.

"If it comes to an even battle between Florence and her next week," she said, "I would lay long odds on Florence."

"She is really coming, then?" said Sir Nicholas, colouring ever so slightly.

"Really coming; they arrive on Sunday night, and then you will have a high old time of it, my friend."

"My good girl, talk of what you know something about," said Sir Nicholas ; "this leader is a good one to go."

"She's not a bad make of horse at all, is she ? Meredyth has hunted her once or twice," said Lady Hilda. "There's no meet on Saturday, Nick, Meredyth goes up to town for the opening of the Lords. Do you know that he is to move the Address ?"

"No, is he ?" said Nicholas indifferently. Lord Meredyth was always rather a sore subject with him ; his success, his riches, his popularity, and above all, a perception that he looked upon his brother-in-law with a feeling not unmingled with contempt, disturbed Sir Nicholas.

"He has got drainage on the brain at present," said Lady Hilda, "and Judith revolves between Captain Digby-Grant,

who makes wild efforts to escape, and Santon the Foreign Office man, with a few lesser lights. Where's my flask, Nick? Did you give it back to me when you filled it?"

There was nothing more said about Joanna, and a couple of good runs put her and everything else in the world out of Sir Nicholas' head for the time being. He had often ridden with the Merevale hounds before, running up from London for the purpose, and mounted on a good hunter, and well to the front, he could almost forget the many things that had happened since he last rode with them, and that this horse that carried him was not his own.

It was Lord Meredyth who brought him very abruptly to earth, as they rode slowly up the Merevale avenue almost in the dark.

They had fallen a little behind the rest, Sir Nicholas preferring to consider his horse to the pleasure of anybody's society, and Lord Meredyth partly on purpose. They rode and smoked for some time in silence, their minds full of the past run: then Lord Meredyth said: "Osborne, I have been thinking over your letter a good deal and should be delighted to see my way to help you. Are you still in the same mind, and do you seriously want to be in a position to enable you to marry?"

Poor Sir Nicholas! He had been dreaming happily over past and future days with the hounds, mixed with a vague satisfaction at the prospect of Joanna's greeting which was before him, and his spirits all at once sank to zero.

He waited a minute or two before he answered, and then he said rather shortly that he had not changed his mind.

"You will understand," said Lord Meredyth slowly, "that it is not very easy to find anything that suits you and that at the same time—excuse me for speaking plainly—you would suit. I could, probably, let you have the agency of my Irish property next year, if you cared to make yourself up in the business a little. I am not exactly clear as to what it is worth, but I could let you know in a few days."

Sir Nicholas' face fell in the darkness.

"The truth is, Meredyth," he said, "that I shall come to almighty smash if I don't get something pretty well immediately. If there is any difficulty about it,"—in an offended tone,—“of course I would not think of troubling you."

Lord Meredyth shrugged his shoulders impatiently; would nothing give an Osborne a small allowance of common sense?

"It is not exactly easy," he said. "As far as I know, you have no particular qualifications for anything. There's a post in China, but you see, Osborne,"—with great hesitation,—“there are—drawbacks. For my part, I would be very glad

to lend you a sum of money, if you have any ideas of your own about making a start. And look here, my dear fellow, is it all over with Lady Florence?"

"D——n Lady Florence!" said Sir Nicholas, with sudden passion. "I am sick of having her dinned into my ears."

They rode the rest of the way in silence, and separated, mutually ill-pleased, at the hall door, Lord Meredyth to make his way to the kennels, and Sir Nicholas to betake himself in ruffled mood to his room.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Since we parted yester eve
I do love thee, love, believe,
Twelve times dearer, twelve hours longer,
One dream deeper, one night stronger,
One sun surer—this much more
Than I loved thee, love, before."

"OH," said Joanna, with a deep sigh of content, "to think that I have not seen you to speak to for twelve long hours, and forty minutes."

The rest of the house were in the billiard-room, or deep in the preparations for an evening of cards, and Sir Nicholas had carried her off to the empty music-room, where they had established themselves very comfortably on one of the broad, high window seats.

"I hope you are duly flattered at my being so glad to see you," said Joanna happily. "I went in to dinner with such a nice boy, and I should have been most agreeable to him, if I had not been distracted by an occasional distant glimpse of your nose, when you leaned forward. I never found the size of your nose a satisfaction to me before, Nicholas dear."

"You don't love me as well as I love you," said Sir Nicholas, for the fiftieth time, "or you would find everything about me a satisfaction to you."

But Joanna was not much moved by this complaint.

"I love you quite well enough for all practical purposes," said she; "but I am still rather sorry to think that boy who took me in to dinner will think me half an idiot."

"Never mind boys," said Sir Nicholas. "I want you to get on with the older people, darling; you must, if you are to make a position for yourself."

"Then you will be pleased with my afternoon," said Joanna. "I have spent it with the fattest and oldest gentleman in the house."

"The Beattie?" said Sir Nicholas, at once.

"Yes," said Joanna. "I wish he wouldn't make me call him

plain Beattie, without a Mr. ; it sounds so impertinent, but he is a very nice old gentleman all the same."

"H'm !" said Sir Nicholas, with distinct doubt in his tone.

"He is," persisted Joanna ; "just think how few old gentlemen would be good enough to bother themselves with a girl, instead of dozing over the fire on a cold afternoon like this. Just because he saw I was a stranger, he took me out and taught me golf all the afternoon."

"I have no doubt he was exceedingly good-natured," said Sir Nicholas, laughing ; "and I am sure he would be immensely delighted if he knew you thought him a nice old gentleman. I am glad you had something to amuse you, my child."

"I liked it awfully," said Joanna ; "the golf course was lovely, and it was great fun. There were such glorious gorse bushes, that made me think how pleased the bees at home would be to be here."

Her tone got just a little wistful, and Sir Nicholas said quickly : "You aren't home-sick, are you, sweetheart ?"

"I shall never be home-sick where you are," said Joanna, very low, "and I should be home-sick in heaven without you."

It was very seldom that she spoke like this ; their love for each other did not need speaking about, and their daily meetings had brought them to terms which were in some ways like those of a husband and wife.

Sir Nicholas was very much touched by her words, and a happy silence fell between them.

He was resolving, with self for once put aside, that, God helping him, he would be very true to Joanna, and make himself a better man for her sake.

She was admiring him with all her heart, thinking how good he was, how well he understood her, and what a lucky girl she could think herself for being chosen by this man among all others. She felt sorry for everybody else in the world.

Lady Hilda and Lord Dawley broke in upon them noisily, bursting into the room in pursuit of each other, and stopping short with exaggerated dismay when they caught sight of the two on the window seat.

Sir Nicholas sprang to the ground, with a very bad word under his breath.

"Hilda," he said, "if this was my house, I should certainly make you supply new locks to the handles of all the doors when you left."

"When I come to stay in your house, Nick, I shall be very careful," said Lady Hilda calmly. "In the meanwhile, though I wouldn't disturb you for worlds, Dawley and I were sent to know if you feel like the making of a little oof to-night ?"

"I can't say that I do particularly," said Sir Nicholas.

"It is true that they don't approve of cards in the north of Ireland, isn't it, Miss Conway?" said Lord Dawley.

Joanna looked anxiously at Sir Nicholas, a look which the others caught and which annoyed him.

"You don't allow Osborne to play, I am sure," Lord Dawley went on teasingly.

"If I were your mother, I certainly should not allow *you* to play," said Joanna sharply, at which Sir Nicholas and Lady Hilda laughed, and Lord Dawley coloured and looked annoyed.

Then they all sauntered off toward the drawing-room, disputing about the best contents for a flask on a day's hunting, which necessarily put Joanna out of the conversation.

As they entered the room, she found a chance of whispering to Sir Nicholas :

"You are not going to play, Nicholas, are you?"

"Don't be a little goose," said he, in return. "A few pounds here or there make no difference whatever."

Joanna had never seen anything at all like the scene round the two long green tables. Everybody was smoking and everybody was drinking, or had drunk, or was going to drink, whiskeys and sodas; a couple of men were making themselves cocktails, Mrs. Kestrell, very much flushed and talking a good deal, was fumbling with her purse, and all the rest were selecting seats and shuffling cards.

Joanna, with five pounds upstairs as the extent of her riches, could not play cards, neither could she smoke or drink whiskey and soda, even had she wished it, or had Sir Nicholas been at all likely to consent. He suggested that she had better go to bed, but she did not feel inclined for this either. She took a secret, shocked interest in the scene; there was a certain inexcusable satisfaction in picturing her mother's feelings had she known what was going on.

In her retired corner by the fire she wondered what Mrs. Conway would do if she were to write her a full and graphic description.

Everybody grew very eager and excited, especially at Mrs. Kestrell's table, where they got rather noisy too. Sir Nicholas, after one or two uncomfortable twinges of conscience about Joanna, forgot her in the satisfaction of winning.

Joanna could see the back of his handsome head, and watched it with much satisfaction. He was very silent, and scarcely touched his tumbler; played steadily and without excitement, and once, to her immense amusement, distinctly pressed the hand of the lady who sat next him. She was getting a little tired and sleepy, and wondering if she might walk straight out of the room, or if she ought to disturb her hostess to say good-night, when Lord Meredyth came in.

"Hallo!" he said. "Is this the order of the day?"

"There's a seat at this table," said Lady Hilda.

"No, thank you! I have just been taking the chair at a temperance lecture in the village, and the change is too abrupt. I will talk to Miss Conway, if she consents."

Joanna not only consented, but liked it very much; she was still under the fascination of his smile.

"I dare say they have told you that I have got Irish politics on the brain, Miss Conway?" he said, drawing in a chair. "Can you give me your opinion of Gladstone and Home Rule?"

Lord Meredyth's good manners were well known; he had never been intentionally rude to man, woman, or child, and nobody ever talked to him without feeling rather raised in his or her own estimation.

Before Joanna went to bed she had ceased to feel depressed by the thought that she was a countrified little girl, with ill-fitting dresses, and entirely out of her element, but all the same she wrote a rather scathing report of the evening in her diary when she went to her room. She had never kept a diary at Ballylone, except a very business-like record, having to do with bees and potatoes, but she had invested in a new fourpenny exercise book before she left home, in which to record her many adventures.

She was just concluding her account of the day with the words:

"I do not like the people here at all; I think they are very fast and ill behaved," when she was startled by a most terrific noise in the passage, joined to wild cries for help.

Joanna ran to the door very much alarmed, and had her breath taken away by receiving a wet sponge full in her face when she opened it.

"I beg your pardon!" said Lord Dawley breathlessly; "it was meant for Lady Hilda."

The passage was full of men in smoking coats, and ladies and sponges and pillows, and a sort of guerilla warfare was going on up and down.

Joanna stood and stared. She had never come across bear-fighting in any shape or form before. Lord Dawley and Lady Hilda were keeping up a brisk sponge fire at close quarters, Lady Meredyth and a couple of men were having a hand to hand encounter further off, and as Joanna gazed she saw one lady come incontinently to the ground with a man on the top of her.

Another sponge from Lord Dawley, this time sent with intention, caught her full on the neck, sending streams of cold water pouring down her dress, and she shut her door hastily. But a few minutes later, her assailant, who had

certainly had quite as much to drink as was at all necessary, announced a desire to come in, on the pretext that he and Mr. Kestrell wanted to turn Catherine wheels against each other over her bed, and Joanna was very thankful she had locked her door. Neither was she amused when she found that her bed was very neatly arranged so that she could not possibly get into it.

CHAPTER XX.

"This is a night of pleasure! Care
I shake thee from me!"

FRIDAY morning was extremely uneventful to Joanna. Everybody got up late and had breakfast at odd hours. She happened to have hers at a little table in the breakfast-room, with Lord Meredyth and Lady Hilda West.

He was going off to Petty Sessions in rather a hurry, and the two girls were soon alone. Lady Hilda was very kind to Joanna; she took her about with her for half the morning, and shook off any men who happened to turn up. She rather distressed her by announcing an intention of calling her "Jo," but on the whole the girl could not help admiring her a little. Her clothes were so well made, and she was so imperturbably at her ease, and then, when she took Joanna to her room, she was undeniably impressed by her new friend's silver-backed brushes, her dressing-case and toilet arrangements in general, the extreme neatness of everything, and the calmness with which she rang for her maid to get out a pair of stockings and a handkerchief. Joanna tried to imagine what Annie at home would think if she was summoned for that purpose.

She admired Lady Hilda's neat dozens of handkerchiefs of all kinds and colours, and her assortment of stockings and shoes filled her with amazement.

When Lady Hilda changed into a gray tweed skirt and coat, with a white blouse and bronze belt, she changed also into bronze stockings and shoes, and twisted a bronze ribbon in her fair curly hair. Joanna looked and admired and sighed, when she thought that here was something that she could never attain in her home-made dresses—a vague something which she found very desirable.

She did not admire Lady Hilda so much a little later, when she found her hanging about the hall in a group of men, her hands in her pockets and a cigarette in her mouth.

After she had left her, Joanna was taken up by The Beattie, a fat old man, who would not consent to grow old, and who still devoted himself to young girls. But Joanna, who could

enjoy herself with most people, was quite ready to be amused, and had not the remotest conception that The Beattie imagined himself to be indulging in a very promising flirtation. Certainly he did get rather unpleasantly close to her at times, but she only moved away, and charitably excused it and his loud breathing, as signs of old age.

Nicholas, as fate would have it, she did not see before lunch, and then, after waiting about for him for some time, she was seized upon with every intention of kindness by Lady Hilda, who thought she was too shy to go in by herself; so she had nearly finished before he turned up.

People all sat where they liked and came in when they liked, so Joanna, under Lady Hilda's wing, found herself at Lord Meredyth's end of the table. Lady Hilda and Lord Meredyth were very often to be found together. Lord Dawley was on the other side of Joanna, by an adroit arrangement on the part of Lady Hilda, beside whom he had intended to sit. For the last two days he had completely deserted his allegiance to Mrs. Kestrell, and made himself over to Lady Hilda, who was not particularly grateful. It had occurred to her, however, that he would be a very satisfactory second string for Joanna, in case of anything going wrong between her and Sir Nicholas. Lord Dawley was young, rich, and the heir to a dukedom, if he *was* a fool, and did paint his face and giggle.

But Joanna and he took to each other not at all kindly.

"I have had a hard morning on the bench, and want to be relaxed this afternoon," said Lord Meredyth; "what is everybody going to do? What is your idea, Judith?"

"I? Captain Digby-Grant is coming over and I have promised to go for a ride with him," said Lady Meredyth: "but some of the rest are going to a function of some sort at Hurst Lee, and there's a picnic to the Towers and a golf match somewhere."

"You had better join my select party," said Lady Hilda. "We are going to have donkey races on the moor, with a sweepstake on each event. We intend to have regular tilting at the ring to-morrow, as there is no meet, and there's to be a preliminary trial with donkeys this afternoon."

"Your plan commends itself to me most," said Lord Meredyth. "I rather fancy myself on a donkey, and I am sure Osborne does, don't you?" he added to Nicholas, who had just come in and taken a seat some way down the table.

"Osborne fancies himself at most times," said Lord Dawley sulkily.

"Had I the advantages of a God-given complexion like yours, Dawley, I certainly should," said Nicholas, without looking up.

"Who is going to the dance at Rosshalton to-night?" said Lord Meredyth. "I suppose we had better have the coach."

"I shall go," said Lady Meredyth; "I suppose I must."

"And I shall go," said Lady Hilda. "It will be bright moonlight coming home, Meredyth, and you must let me drive."

"And what about you, Miss Conway?" said Lord Meredyth, turning to her.

Joanna had been looking anxiously and pleadingly in Nicholas' direction, ever since the word dance had been said. She wanted very badly to go.

"I don't know," she said with hesitation.

"There, Nicholas, you are appealed to," said Lady Meredyth, with a sneer.

"Of course I shall do exactly as Miss Conway does," said Nicholas gravely, in answer to his sister's tone more than to her words.

"Very good indeed, Nick!" said Lady Hilda approvingly.

"We shall see you dance next," said Lord Meredyth, and his wife added: "Lady Florence will be here in time for the hunt ball."

Nicholas and Joanna exchanged a look of amusement.

"Confound that woman!" said Lady Hilda, under her breath; "she just lives to make mischief. Poor Captain Digby-Grant, he's going to have her afternoon and evening."

"She will find it rather difficult to make mischief between Nicholas and me," said Joanna proudly.

She was not at all anxious.

No fears of Lady Florence Delacque disturbed her delight at the prospect of her very first ball. Nicholas laughed at her, but promised to enjoy himself if she would not insist on making him dance, and she quite felt that this was all that could be expected from him.

In return for her good fortune, she was almost persuaded to immolate herself by playing golf with The Beattie, instead of going with Nicholas and the rest to the moor.

But Nicholas interfered, and pointed out that her duty lay in coming to encourage and look after him during the donkey races.

Here, too, Joanna enjoyed herself immensely. She enjoyed the freedom and she enjoyed the fun, two things which she had longed for all the nineteen years of her life. She galloped about on her donkey, actually won a race, and was as much amused as anybody when Nicholas among others came disastrously to the ground. She galloped with the rest at mad-cap pace through the streets of Merevale, to the dismay of the inhabitants, and did not stop to think of rowdiness or any-

thing else. It was glorious, it was intoxicating, to think there was no one there to keep her in order, no one to say: "Joanna, would you oblige me by going up to put your room in a state less like a pig-sty?" or, "Joanna, as usual I see you are thinking of nothing but the pleasures of this world."

At Merevale nobody seemed to think of anything but pleasure, and though Joanna entirely declined to have anything to say to whiskey and soda and cigarettes, and still jumped when Lady Hilda gave vent to a somewhat startling expression, she was marvellously quickly getting used to it all.

But she was undoubtedly aloof from the others in a way which annoyed Sir Nicholas. He would have liked to see her still absolutely different from the rest, but nevertheless surrounded by admirers, who would all enviously give place at his good pleasure.

But instead of crowding round her, the men for the most part rather ignored her, and Joanna did not care in the least. Also with Lady Meredyth and her set she was an undoubted outsider. Her dresses were not up to the Merevale mark, being, not unnaturally, unable to compare favourably with Worth and Redfern; in fact, naturally enough she was out of her element, and though Sir Nicholas admitted it to be natural he did not like it.

He did not wish her to be like the rest, to tell *risque* stories, smoke, swear, bet, and do worse, like a good many of his sister's set, who had gained for Merevale the name of the fastest house in the county, but still he was annoyed that she could not hold her own. He had said something of the kind to her, as they went up to dress for dinner and the dance, and Joanna laughed, though she was a little hurt.

"How unreasonable you are, dear boy," she said, "you tell me I am not to do ever so many things, that I am not to be like these people or to see too much of any of them, and now you don't seem to like it. You know men can't want to bother themselves with an engaged girl, even if I was pretty, and not countrified. I *do* wish my dresses were better made, and that I could do you more credit, darling."

After which there was nothing for Sir Nicholas to do but to kiss her in a dark corner of the stairway, and assure her that he was quite satisfied with her,—which for the moment he was,—and would not have changed her in any way if he could.

Lady Hilda did her very best for Joanna that evening. She made the girl try on her dress early, and brought her own maid upon the scene to make a few alterations which were a vast improvement; meanwhile she gave her dancing lessons in her dressing-gown, which failed to be a great success. Joanna was too eager to learn, too anxious, too unpractised. However, her dress looked wonderfully improved, and Lady

Hilda's maid, still to the front, did her hair for her, and then Lady Hilda arranged the butterfly brooches in her hair and on her dress, and insisted on lending the girl a string of pearls for her neck; felicity reached its height when sprays of white roses and maiden-hair made their appearance by Sir Nicholas' orders.

"Now," said Lady Hilda, "I am pleased with you—content—satisfied. Those flowers are a very good finishing touch, and in the line of flowers, I must say Nick knows what he's about."

"Yes, he used to send Lady Florence Delacque a bunch of violets every day all through the winter, didn't he?" said Joanna, laughing from pure lightness of heart.

"Go and look at yourself in the glass, while I fly to dress," said Lady Hilda; "I shall be late as it is."

"I laid your dress ready an hour past, my lady," said the maid, who did not approve of this trouble expended over extraneous young women who had no maids of their own.

Joanna went over to the glass, and scarcely recognized herself.

Was she this girl with shining eyes and a pretty colour, with hair done as she had never worn it before, and a white dress which had almost lost its home-made appearance? When she was alone she positively danced through the room in her delight. What would Nicholas think of this transformation scene?

What Nicholas thought she very soon discovered, as he overtook her on the stairs, and caught her in his arms, oblivious of the danger of crushing her dress or of being seen by some of the rest. He also took her in to dinner, and made her perfectly happy.

As for Lady Hilda, she made a very hasty toilet, and was extremely late for dinner.

Joanna was absolutely the first to reach the little sitting-room where the dance party had agreed to assemble, and was having a little private practice of the unconquerable valse when Lord Meredyth sauntered in.

"Hallo!" he said, laughing, "have you begun to dance already?"

"It is my only trouble," said Joanna, with a sigh; "I cannot learn to dance. I practised at home with a chair every evening after I heard I was to come here, and Lady Hilda has been trying to teach me, but it is all no use." She ended with a sigh.

"Wait till you get into the ballroom, and hear the music," said Lord Meredyth encouragingly; "you have no idea what a difference that will make."

"Do you think so?" said Joanna. "I used to make Polly

play,—that is my little niece,—but she only knew ‘The March of the Men of Harlech,’ and that was not very good to dance to.”

“I shouldn’t think so,” Lord Meredyth agreed.

“But you see, it will be so discouraging for my first partner,” said Joanna. “Lady Hilda says that I jib, and I shall do it worse, I know, when I am nervous ; and then Nicholas won’t like it if I don’t get people to dance with.”

“Never fear, you will get plenty,” Lord Meredyth said, “and I am so sure of it,” he added good-naturedly, “that I want to lay claim to some dances before we start.”

In saying which he was really very kind, as he did not think Joanna’s account of herself as a partner sounded particularly promising, and he took no great interest in her personally.

“Oh,” said she, flushing very red, “you must not think I was fishing for you to ask me to dance.”

“My dear Miss Conway, if you knew me a little better you would know that fishing never answers with me,” said Lord Meredyth. “I ask you to dance because I really want very much to dance with you.”

“Oh, thank you ! but I am afraid you don’t know what you are letting yourself in for,” said Joanna discouragingly.

“Am I to conclude that you won’t dance with me ?”

“Oh, no ! I should like it very much if it won’t be a bother. But I should advise you to have a polka ; I can manage that, if you won’t go backwards.”

“All right ! the first polka, and I shall expect some more too, if you can spare them,” Lord Meredyth said, and in so saying, he unconsciously gained for himself Joanna’s gratitude forever. It was not a very great kindness, and it was one he forgot all about next day, but she never forgot it.

It was an evening to look back upon. The eight-mile drive on the top of the coach beside Nicholas, the bewildering entrance among crowds of strangers, which made her feel quite rejoiced when she caught sight of a face from Merevale, even of somebody to whom she had not spoken two words. There were plenty of dances to be sat out with Sir Nicholas, and plenty more to be danced. Lord Meredyth rose to the occasion nobly, and complained not, though Joanna trod upon his feet and pulled away from him in her nervousness.

By the end of the evening things, as far as they concerned her, were going much better ; she had accomplished the *pas de quatre* and the polka, and even felt herself becoming more manageable in the valse.

“She is a nice little girl,” Lord Meredyth said to Lady Hilda as they watched her going past with a young Campbell in the Guards, bumping a good deal it must be acknowledged,

"but the very last girl I could have imagined Osborne would choose."

"Nick is a very good fellow in his way," said Lady Hilda, "but not to be trusted the least in the world; I am afraid that poor little soul will have rather a bad time of it next week."

"Do you think Lady Florence——"

"I know she is awfully wild with Nick, and it is not a fair battle."

"Judith says he told her it is completely over and done with as regards her, and in fact was more talk the whole time than anything else."

"But then Nick is such an awful liar," said Lady Hilda.

They were rather a rowdy party going back on the coach; they smoked, sang, and threw anything that came handy at each other, and finally Lady Hilda and Lord Dawley, who had been usefully and agreeably employed for some time in putting hairpins down each other's necks, took it into their heads to start a scrambling voyage over the seats, upon which Lord Meredyth took it upon himself to interfere. He was quite sufficiently employed with his four horses, which were excited by the moonlight and the noise.

Joanna would have liked Lady Hilda to be a little quieter, but she could not forget how much gratitude she owed her, not even when she came to her room that night to regale her with several stories of the evening's proceedings which she would rather not have heard. How Mrs. Kestrell had developed a startling affection for Lord Dawley after supper, and had to be taken home then and there by her husband in an extremely unequivocal condition; how Captain Digby-Grant had announced that he was sick to death of Lady Meredyth and had cut three of her dances; and how Lord Goring had been discovered kissing Mrs. Cuming in the fernery, by her husband.

"Just like a lot of servant girls, only worse," Joanna remarked to herself privately.

But she forgot all about that and everything else in her own happiness when she was alone.

CHAPTER XXI.

"We did not part as we meet, dear.
Well, time has his own stern cures."

ON Saturday Lord Meredyth was in London all day, and everybody else attended tilting at the ring on the moor.

Joanna looked on, and felt filled with pride when Nicholas galloped past with the rings neatly arranged on his spear.

He came out victorious after a close struggle with Captain Digby-Grant, who had come over for the occasion.

The ladies' match was a failure as to pace, and, after watching for a little, Joanna went off and had a good golf practice with her friend The Beattie and the Campbells. In the evening they all went up to London, and to the theatre—Joanna's very first theatre.

The "Enfant Prodigue" bewildered her a little, and amused her very much. She did not understand in the least when Lady Hilda asked her, later on: "Well, my little *ingénue*, were you shocked?"

She had seen nothing in the world to be shocked about.

It was a delightful day, ending delightfully, and she was not at all disturbed when she heard Lady Meredyth say to Nicholas, as they said good night: "This time to-morrow, Nick, Florence will be here."

Joanna was living in a whirl of excitement. Ballylone seemed years away, and Merevale the most delightful place in the world, where things were always happening.

The strangeness and alarm of the first few days had worn off, and though Lady Meredyth did not give herself much trouble to be civil, she soon found that she had practically very little to do with Lady Meredyth. She was free to do whatever she liked from morning to night, with nobody to ask her if she had learnt her gospel or got her work ready for the Zenana meeting; and then she was in the house with Sir Nicholas.

Joanna did not crave for admiration; except for Sir Nicholas' sake she had not the smallest desire to see herself a centre of attraction. She was quite content with him, with The Beattie to play golf with, with Lady Hilda to admire and disapprove of, and the Campbell boys to fill up odd moments.

She had the completest and most unshakable faith in Sir Nicholas.

That one episode on his return from Dublin had disturbed it, but not seriously.

She was proud and delighted to see his popularity, to hear him called upon for songs and to take part in everything, to see that any of the ladies of the party were glad to talk with him. He never neglected her, and was ready to relate to her all his sweet speeches to other people, and to laugh over them freely.

"If I was once to be really jealous, dear, it would be with good reason, and I should never believe in you again," she said to him once.

One Sunday evening, after a day in which Joanna only went to church once, taught in no Sunday-school, for the first time in her life learnt neither gospel nor collect, and, instead

of reading good books and going for a sedate walk, was mounted on a quiet horse and joined Sir Nicholas, Lady Hilda and the rest in a gallop over the downs, and a visit to the kennels with Lord Meredyth afterwards—on the evening of this delightful day, Lady Florence Delacque and suite, including her husband, arrived.

Nicholas had been a little nervous all day—avowedly nervous, as far as Joanna was concerned. His last parting with Lady Florence—a parting when he had completely lost his head and absolutely—*cried*—kept coming into his mind all through the day; he had not told Joanna quite the whole story of that last parting, and he hoped very sincerely that Lady Florence had forgotten it.

When they got in from the moor she had arrived, but Sir Nicholas did not rush at once to greet her. Instead he carried Joanna off to the billiard room, and they had tea brought to them there, which lack of eagerness to meet her entirely convinced him there was nothing to be feared.

It was Joanna who urged him to go in: "She will think it so rude if you do not."

But Nicholas knew there would be a question of more than rudeness in Lady Florence Delacque's opinion of him.

He went up to dress for dinner rather early, and took a little more trouble than usual over his attire; it was natural enough that he should not wish an old friend think he had degenerated, however much his feeling with regard to that old friend might have changed.

He threw away several ties before he had arranged one to his satisfaction; he shaved for a second time that day, which was absolutely unnecessary, and he spent a considerable time before his glass, arranging his moustache to his complete satisfaction.

It was then he found, to his immense disgust, that his hand was shaking, and decided aloud that he had been smoking too much lately.

Finally he waited until he knew everybody would have assembled in the drawing-room, and then sauntered very slowly downstairs. He made another pause at the drawing-room door, and wished he had asked Joanna to wait for him.

Then he said to himself that he was a fool, and walked decidedly into the room, with a little more manner on than usual.

Lady Florence Delacque was sitting beside Lady Meredyth, with a few men grouped round them. She was rather tall and very graceful; her figure was, perhaps, rather too much developed; she had the clear complexion which generally goes with red hair, hair which suited her very well, and twisted into little curls over her forehead, and she had very dark eyes, of which she knew how to make the utmost use.

London society had decided that Lady Florence was a beauty two years ago, but she was not beautiful. She was pretty, and, better than that, very fascinating and attractive.

She looked up when Sir Nicholas had crossed the room and stood at her side, and held out her hand with a smile.

"I am flattered to see you still remember me, Sir Nicholas," she said. "No, Mr. Stanton, I know nothing about the intricacies of the Foreign Office, and that is the very reason I asked the question."

She turned away, and Sir Nicholas remained standing rather awkwardly where he was. He was annoyed to know that his hand had trembled when it touched Lady Florence's, and that he had flushed like a boy when she spoke.

Then dinner was announced, and Lady Meredyth said: "Nick, will you take in Lady Florence?" and, as a matter of course, he had to offer his arm.

It took some little time for everybody to fall into order and walk across to the dining-room, and all this time Sir Nicholas and Lady Florence were absolutely silent. He racked his brain for something to say that would not be too absurdly inappropriate. It was impossible that he could begin by a remark upon the weather or her journey, which he would have considered a stupidity had they been just introduced.

His last words to her had been: "As long as I live I shall be true to you. You may change, but I never shall, and no other woman shall ever be anything to me."

It was rather difficult to follow up this by hoping that it had not settled down to a frost to-night to interfere with hunting, or fearing that she must have found her journey from Northumberland rather tiring.

So Sir Nicholas said nothing, twisted his moustache and looked appealingly at Joanna, and Lady Florence disposed of her fan, gloves, and train, addressed a few remarks to her left-hand neighbour, and began her dinner.

At last she broke the silence:

"Well," she said, in a low voice, "have you nothing to say to me, Sir Nicholas? Are you waiting for me to congratulate you? Pray, consider it done."

"Thanks," said he, trying to gain courage from his moustache.

"I think you might have written to tell me," she said.

Sir Nicholas drank off a glass of champagne, and felt better.

"I d—did think of it," he returned, with his stammer very marked, "b—but you had never written to me since I left England, so how could I tell that you cared to hear?"

Lady Florence looked at him, and turned away to answer a remark from her right-hand neighbour.

Then she said: "Let us leave it an open question which of

us has the most to complain of. Will you point me out your *fiancée* ? ”

Sir Nicholas felt that he was getting off very easily, and his spirits rose, but this last request made him a little uncomfortable again.

“Look down the opposite side of the table to your right; she came in with The Beattie,” he said shortly.

“That dowdy little person ? ” said Lady Florence, beginning to laugh. “That is the first joke I ever heard you perpetrate, Nicholas, but I am not so easily taken in, and know you a little better than that.”

It was a mistake which would have been embarrassing in the extreme if it had been unintentional, but it was very intentional indeed.

Lady Florence had had Joanna pointed out to her by officious friends the moment she had entered the drawing-room, and she knew very well that he was not joking, nor at all in the humour for joking.

She said she was so very sorry, that she hoped Sir Nicholas would forgive her stupidity, when she allowed herself to be convinced of her mistake. Would he introduce Miss Conway to her after dinner ? Would he tell her how the world had been going with him since their parting ?

“I used to hear about you sometimes from your sister,” she said, “but a year is a long time, and it will be a year on the 28th of next month. You see I have got a pretty good memory, Sir Nicholas.”

And Sir Nicholas was immensely flattered. In his secret heart it gratified him not a little to find that a woman of the world like Lady Florence had by no means forgotten him. He said to himself that he was very sorry if she still cared for him, and that he would have done anything in his power to prevent it, but what could he do ?

He was very grateful to her for taking things so sensibly, when she could have given him a very uncomfortable time of it, so grateful that he thought it was only his duty to do his best to make the rest of dinner pass pleasantly to her.

But he was unreasonably annoyed with Joanna. Certainly her dress did not set straight, he said to himself, as she followed the rest to the door ; he must tell her, but a girl ought to look after those things for herself.

“What do you think of Nicholas’ latest ? ” said Lady Meredyth in the drawing-room.

“H’m ; has she any money ? ” said Lady Florence, settling herself comfortably on the sofa.

“Does she look like it ? ”

Lady Florence put up her long-handled eyeglass, and calmly studied her rival.

"There's no accounting for tastes," she said, with a shrug of her extremely pretty shoulders, rather a favourite action of hers.

"My idea is that Nick amused himself rather too much in the wilderness, and found himself seized upon by an irate father," said Lady Meredyth.

"Far be it from me to insinuate anything of the kind," Lady Florence said. "How does Miss Conway get on here?"

"Oh, she is rather a stick, but Hilda has taken her up, and Meredyth too to a certain extent. He and I have just had a mighty row over the Kestrells. He had his eyes rather opened at a dance at Rosshalton on Friday, and he swears she shall never set foot in the house again."

"Be thankful you have nothing worse to quarrel about than that," said Lady Florence. "Do you know what my bear has just decided? that we spend the season in Northumberland this year."

"You won't stand that, will you?" said Lady Meredyth. "If the worst comes to the worst you could come to me——"

"No, I am to remain at Enderby to learn to appreciate my home, and, I suppose, to appreciate James," said Lady Florence with her shrug.

"But in the meantime there is a certain great personage coming on Tuesday, who counts himself very warmly of your friends."

"And in the meantime still, I hear Sir Nicholas is very great in Coster songs," said Lady Florence.

Whereupon she calmly walked Nicholas off to the music room, where she made him sing through all his songs, which were few, if select, from "Knocking in the Old Kent Road" to "Daisy Bell."

Next day there was a meet.

Joanna could not go, but she got up as before to see the others off, and admired Lady Florence in her smart habit very frankly.

She would not have kept Nicholas at home for any consideration, though she pictured him in different dangers all day, in a way which she knew to be very foolish.

He was the best of riders, but accidents happened to everybody, and Joanna's happiness made her anxious—it seemed too good to last.

But physical dangers were all she was afraid of.

Nicholas enjoyed himself immensely. He gave Lady Florence a lead as he had often done before, and he rode home with her too.

Where was the harm? She had taken his defection very well, and there was no reason that they should not still be friends.

So he rode beside her in the dusk, and talked of other runs they had had together, and recognised old landmarks along the roads, with an embarrassment which was not unpleasant.

When he came in, he entirely relieved his conscience by telling Joanna all about it, and she was glad when he had been civil, and very sorry for Lady Florence.

But in the evening Lady Florence was surrounded as usual, and Joanna, also as usual, was a little out of it.

"Miss Conway looks dull," Lady Florence said, directing Nicholas' attention to the fact with great show of kindness.

CHAPTER XXII.

"And nearer, nearer still, the tide
Of music seems to come,
There's something like a human voice,
And something like a drum."

"MISS CONWAY, may I sit next to you?" said The Beattie in his fat voice.

"Oh," said Joanna, "I am very sorry, but I have promised to keep a place."

The coach had come round to the door to take a select party to a charity concert in Merevale school-house, a concert which was to begin at seven with a special view to the convenience of the big house, and the return of its inmates in time for dinner.

Joanna loved coach drives, and had looked forward to this one all day. She was peering rather anxiously into the hall now; Nicholas was certainly very late.

Lord Dawley, who was not only going, but was going to perform, came up to her as she stood on the steps in the dusk.

"I am going to drive," he said.

"I shall go all the same," said Joanna. "I'll take the risk."

"You think you are very funny," said Lord Dawley sulkily.

They always clashed, those two; Lord Dawley never knew whether Joanna was in fun or in earnest, and by way of being on the right side, resented everything she said. He remarked now, that if Miss Conway did not want to come, he hoped she would not constrain her inclinations on his account, and she asked him if he could tell her what was the difference between being funny and being rude.

Lord Dawley said that he never could guess riddles, in his most sullen tone, and Joanna was beginning an ironical speech when Lord Meredyth came over and interrupted them.

"It is time to start," he said. "Are you going to give Miss Conway the box-seat, Dawley?"

"Oh, no!" they both said in a breath, with such eagerness that Lord Meredyth laughed, as he helped Joanna to an humbler place.

"Is everybody here?" he said, standing on the step. "Campbell, are you ready with a good blast—you have the horn?"

"Oh, no," said Joanna anxiously, "everybody hasn't come yet."

"If you are keeping that seat for Osborne, he is not coming," shouted Lord Dawley from the driving-seat, "I saw him in the billiard room with Lady Florence not ten minutes ago."

"Miss Conway kept the seat for me, very kindly," said Lord Meredyth, with audacious disregard of truth. "Dawley, you might just as well prevent that right leader from coming up into the coach, and let us be off."

He swung himself up beside Joanna. The Campbells executed some elaborate flourishes upon the horn, and they were off.

But the drive was spoilt for Joanna, pleasant though Lord Meredyth was.

Lord Dawley's style of driving was more dashing than reassuring to those under his care, but he brought them safely to the school-house after once drawing up with his leaders' noses touching a cart which barred his way, and twice shav-ing so narrowly round corners that the coach swung over in a way which very nearly upset its balance.

"I'll drive back, Dawley, if you don't mind," said Lord Meredyth mildly, after he had recovered from the abruptness of their stop, which shook them all out of their seats.

Then they found that David Campbell's violin had been forgotten, and after everybody had accused everybody else of having forgotten it, and a groom had been sent back for it, they all rattled up the concert room, in the middle of a song, to the seats that had been reserved for them.

They settled down with a great deal of whispering and laughing, and with the attention of the whole audience concentrated upon them.

The unfortunate singer finished his song without being attended to by anybody but Joanna, who felt quite miserable about him, and longed to have courage to support the stray plaudits which were vouchsafed to him.

She had got a seat next The Beattie, and Lord Meredyth, who had come in later than the rest, took the only vacant chair on the other side of hers.

There was a pause, while somebody came down to ask if

Lord Dawley and the Campbells, who were to perform, would not come on the platform, an honour which they declined with more energy than politeness.

Then came a very nervous girl, who held her music in front of her face and whispered, coming to a miserable pause when somebody in the audience shouted : " Sing up ! "

Through her song The Beattie talked steadily to Joanna, to her extreme distress, and Lord Dawley said : " A decent looking girl enough if she would let one have a fair sight of her face," so loud, that Joanna, who was sitting quite at the opposite end of the row, heard him distinctly.

Then came three young men, in dark coats and very light trowsers, who sang : " A Little Farm Well Tilled," and broke down and went into fits of laughter in the middle, to the extreme delight of the audience. They made two efforts to begin again, but were always overcome with amusement before they got halfway through, and had to retire amidst furious applause.

The Campbell twins' violin and 'cello duet ought to have come next, but there was no sign of David's violin, though somebody had been sent to the door in the middle of the " Little Farm " to see, and a pause ensued.

Lady Meredyth sent a whisper down the line that Lord Dawley had better take his song now, but he did not seem to see it.

The audience began to get impatient, and the platform performers very unhappy. The manager went from one to the other, but no one seemed inclined to anticipate his or her performance.

Finally Lord Dawley became the exceedingly ill-tempered victim, and allowed himself to be conducted on to the platform.

Then a leaf out of the particular song he wished to sing was missing, and had to be hunted for. Lord Dawley was greatly perturbed, but he declined to be persuaded to sing anything else, and finally it was discovered under his chair.

Upon which he faced the audience, very red and furious, and the chairman said that owing to an unforeseen delay the Honourable Messrs. Campbell were unable to perform until later in the evening, but that Lord Dawley had most kindly taken their place. His Lordship was about to give them a treat by singing " Absent yet Present " in his well-known style.

Meanwhile the Merevale house party were amusing themselves by deluging the unhappy Lord Dawley with paper pellets.

" Don't sing that old thing," said Lady Meredyth.

" Pull yourself together, and don't look as if you were going

to be hung," said David Campbell, the delinquent, getting a scowl in return.

Then the climax was reached by a false start, which made the accompanist almost as nervous as the performer, and which Lord Dawley's own particular party applauded vociferously.

"We had better begin again," said Lord Dawley sourly.

This time he was totally demoralised, but kept on losing his place, and trying back amidst furious applause.

"I see thee, I hear thee, I feel thy embrace!" he sang without any fervour whatever, and with a scowl upon his pink-and-white boyish face. "You are two bars ahead of me!" in a furious whisper to the accompanist.

"It is a great mercy for the young woman that she *was* absent," said Kenneth Campbell in a perfectly audible undertone.

Finally singer and accompanist came to utter grief towards the end, and Lord Dawley broke down entirely, while Joanna forgave him everything and almost hated her friends the Campbells. It was all very well for them; they did not know what it was to be nervous.

Everybody laughed a great deal, and several Merevale house ladies threw bouquets to Lord Dawley, who kicked them disgustedly aside as he left the platform.

"By Jove, I never knew that was a comic song before!" said David Campbell.

"You certainly *did* give us a treat, Dawley!" said Lady Meredyth.

The unfortunate youth, who really had a very good voice, had no resource save to beat an abrupt retreat.

Next came a recitation of "The Arab and his Steed" by the village schoolmaster, which was interrupted in the middle by the arrival of the long-lost violin.

However, there was an encore, due perhaps more to the personality of the reciter than to the extreme novelty or good delivery of his recitation, which was given with more marking of the ends of the lines than of anything else.

He gave "Papa's Letter" as an encore, which he evidently had not learned so well, and during which he was obliged to have recourse to the prompter at the most pathetic moments.

The Campbells' duet went off without any hitches, and in the middle of the next song it occurred to Lady Meredyth that it was time to go, and she leaned over to her husband and asked for the time with the utmost disregard of the performer.

"Get your wraps together," she said. "We must go after this man has brought his performance to an end."

"Have you got the 'cello part as well as your own, David?" said Kenneth Campbell across a dozen people.

"You must let me have the seat beside you coming home," said The Beattie, getting so close to Joanna's ear that his breathing tickled it.

"Oh, hush!" she said in distress, and then the song came to an end and there was a full stop while the Merevale house party made their exit, and a few spectators who wished to be fashionable followed their example.

"Now for my seat," said The Beattie.

"If you don't think you had better go inside," said Joanna in all kindness. "It is all very well up there when people are young."

Whereat The Beattie laughed uncomfortably, and nearly broke his neck in trying to show his activity by swinging himself up like Lord Meredyth.

After which he got closer and closer to Joanna, breathing hard all the time, and ended up, to her unbounded amazement, by trying to kiss her in the dark.

She had been in rather low spirits all evening, but this had the effect of making her feel absolutely sick.

Even Lord Dawley, who had not expressed any wish to drive home, and had taken a very back seat, was infinitely preferable as a neighbour to this hot, fat, horrible old man.

As for Nicholas, he took her in to dinner, and said he was very sorry, but he had totally forgotten about the concert.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"'But I,' he replied, 'have promised another, when love was free, To love her alone, alone, who alone and afar loves me.'

'Why that,' she said, 'is no reason.

Love's always free, I'm told.

Will you vow to be safe from the headache on Tuesday,

And think it will hold?'"

ONE after another, people took it upon themselves to say or hint to Nicholas that he was throwing himself away, till he began secretly to think so himself. He liked all his belongings to be of the very best, and he was very much subject to outside influence. Many a time and oft had a possession of his, of which he had thought very highly, known a sudden fall in his estimation owing to the different opinion of somebody else.

He wished himself and all that concerned him to be universally admired and envied, which was unfortunate, as his wishes were never likely to be fulfilled. Hence he had moments of great elation, and others of quite as deep depression, and it depressed him in the extreme that everybody at Merevale did not admire Joanna.

Lady Florence was one of the people who hinted. She always spoke of Joanna in the kindest manner, calling her "poor little thing" or "a good little soul," in a pitying tone which was worse to Nicholas than anything.

Lady Meredyth spoke out plainly. "I really did think you had cut your wisdom teeth, Nick," she said. "Miss Conway is a very good girl, I don't doubt, but not of our class——"

"She is a lady," broke in Nicholas.

"Yes, I daresay. So are a good many girls it is not advisable to marry. Of course it is no business of mine, and you are quite right to marry her, if you like her, and have found a way to live without money and society. I should think she would make a capital wife if you intend to live at Ballylone."

Nicholas shuddered. Ballylone possessed no attractions for him.

To Lady Florence Lady Meredyth said casually one day: "You would be doing Nick a kindness if you would put a stop to that absurd entanglement of his." But Lady Florence only laughed.

In truth, Sir Nicholas' engagement did more than annoy her; it wounded and disturbed her in a way which she would not have thought possible in the days when he was utterly devoted to her, and she laughed at him, liked him, and found him useful.

She took a little extra trouble now to flatter him and otherwise make herself agreeable to him, and Nicholas could be influenced only too easily through his vanity.

The great personage who had been spoken of by Lady Meredyth came to Merevale, and joined Lady Florence's train of admirers most openly, and it flattered Sir Nicholas' absurd conceit to know that she was always glad when it was possible to throw aside the Prince for him.

But in justice to him be it said, he had not as yet the least idea of treating Joanna badly. For one thing, he really loved her in a way which had nothing to say to his occasional, passionate admiration for Lady Florence, and for another, any steady ideas of honour which Nicholas Osborne did possess held him to the girl who trusted him as no one else in the world did.

As for Joanna, she had not one single doubt or fear—not even in the long days when Sir Nicholas and Lady Florence among the rest went out hunting, and she was left at home.

A quite new happiness had been introduced into her life, thanks to Lord Meredyth, which filled up hunting days and all odd moments.

He had found her one day sitting on the floor in the music room, laboriously carving a very hard bit of wood in imita-

tion of one of the panels of the door, and perfectly happy and content.

Nicholas came into Joanna's carving, as he came into every other concern or thought of her life. Her wild dreams of success some day were all for him.

She was delighted when she found that Lord Meredyth could give her hints, and still more delighted when he made her a present of some tools, and arranged for a Windsor master to give her a few lessons on hunting days, to pay for which part of her treasured five pounds went gladly.

So she was perfectly happy.

It was Lady Hilda who was most displeased with the state of affairs, and who took upon herself to try to open Joanna's eyes.

"Don't be a little fool, Jo," she said one day, when she was sitting on Joanna's bed eating chocolates, while her hostess was happily carving a group of lilies, which she had begged from the gardener, with Lord Meredyth's support. "Open your eyes, my child, and in case of accidents, cease to be uncivil to Lord Dawley."

"What on earth do you mean?" said Joanna, beginning upon her second lily.

"It's as plain as a pikestaff that Florence is doing her best to get Nick back, and if you don't take good care she will succeed," said Lady Hilda, shaking the chocolate box to bring one of a kind she particularly appreciated to the top. "Take my advice, and get homesick, and make him take you back to Ireland. Believe me, I know Nick."

Joanna's hand slipped and she cut through the lily's stalk. But she answered steadily and quite lightly:

"I surely ought to know him best, and you may believe me when I tell you that I can trust him entirely."

"Of course you can, if you like, but if you take my advice, you won't," said Lady Hilda. "At any rate, to please me, have a chocolate and be civil to Lord Dawley."

Joanna laughed; she had been startled, but only for the first moment. Nicholas untrue to her? It was ridiculous, absurd, impossible!

"I wish you hadn't made me jump and cut through this stalk," she said, "and as for Lord Dawley, he hates me."

"He might change that," said Lady Hilda tranquilly.

"Well, I can't say I think he would be a good exchange," said Joanna. "Hilda, you can't deny that he is an absolute fool?"

"He'll be just as good as Nick twenty years hence, perhaps better, for Nick may be fat. He is all very well now, but he won't be a nice old man."

"You really must not speak to me like that," said Joanna.

"I am very bold," said Lady Hilda drily. "Can't you yourself see Nick a fat, selfish old man like Beattie, looking forward to his dinner all day, and trying to flirt with girls who laugh at him for his pains?"

Joanna carved in indignant silence, but Lady Hilda was not easily suppressed.

"Well, if you don't object to the picture I have drawn," she said, "why not keep The Beattie as a second string? I couldn't myself, but that's purely a matter of taste."

Joanna laughed in spite of herself.

"Haven't you any matchmaking of your own to attend to, my dear Hilda?" she said.

"Which speech in plain English is equivalent to—mind your own business," said Lady Hilda. "There, take the chocolate box. If I eat any more I shall be ill. Well, you cross child, I was engaged once, for exactly a week."

Joanna was interested at once, ready to sympathise, to find an excuse for all her friend's present oddities.

"How was it broken off?" she said.

"Well," said Lady Hilda, lolling comfortably on the bed, with a good deal of terra-cotta stocking and white petticoat visible. "I said that before we were married my *fiancé* must drop a pretty little establishment at St. John's Wood, and everybody else said it was scandalous of a girl like me to know anything about such things. But the chief point," with a short laugh, "is what *he* said, and that was that he—wouldn't. So he keeps his *chère amie* and I keep my liberty. If you don't understand, Miss Joanna, ask no questions."

But Joanna did understand; understood, too, that there was hurt pride, if not hurt affection, in Lady Hilda's voice.

She forgave her for her thoughts of Nicholas, and they brought her no doubt, no doubt at all, till one evening a sort of crisis came.

Skirt dancing was the order of the night, and Lady Florence was one of the performers. Nicholas had never seen her look so pretty, so exciting, so disturbing. The applause which was given to the four performers seemed to belong only to her, and he hated the Prince when the latter drew Lady Florence aside to compliment her apparently more warmly than was at all necessary.

Then came wild games, during which everybody grew very hot and excited, and the climax came when Nicholas, who had never lost sight of Lady Florence, pursued her down a passage in the upstairs regions, and caught her, hot and breathless, in his arms.

There was nobody there but themselves. Lady Florence's dress, which was low enough without any disarrangement, was a little disturbed and pulled about, and Sir Nicholas had

had quite enough champagne to excite him without anything else.

She struggled with him at first, and he held her closer and more passionately.

Everything was forgotten—Joanna was forgotten—honour was forgotten.

But it was different next morning, when Joanna came to him, doubting nothing, and putting up her fresh girlish face to be kissed, and Sir Nicholas felt himself a brute and a villain.

He could have rushed forward and pulled her away from Lady Florence when she went to shake hands with her and wish her good morning.

Consequently, as he exceedingly disliked feeling not at peace with himself, he took the first opportunity of trying to transfer the burden to Joanna's shoulders.

He took her out with him, and they found a sheltered corner by the river, where there was a seat under the trees, and there, overcoming a certain feeling of reluctance, Nicholas took Joanna on his knee, and kissed her, and asked her if she was quite sure she loved him, and then put her away from him, taking her hand, and looking out to the river in a silence which lasted some minutes.

What was this thing he was going to do? A thing which, once done, neither he nor anybody else could ever undo. To open Joanna's eyes—to teach her to know good and evil—was it a wicked thing, a thing which he would repent of all his life long?

He was doing it because he wanted somebody to excuse him to himself, to reinstate him in his own good opinion; but he repeated to himself, with unnecessary fervour, that he was doing it because it was right for her to know.

Joanna was very happy, very glad at the thought of having Nicholas to herself for a whole morning, and very sure that she could soon soothe away whatever trouble was betokened by his manner.

"Joanna," said Sir Nicholas.

Nothing was done yet; there was still time to pause, still time to wonder if she would ever look at him again with that complete trust in her brown eyes.

"Joanna," he said again, "you know that when most fellows get engaged, whatever sort of life they may have led before, they make certain resolutions."

"Yes, dear," said Joanna vaguely.

"Well," he went on, with much embarrassment, and his head turned away, "if a man—through a mistake—or—or—well, if he found he had broken through these resolutions—do you think he should tell the girl?"

"Dear boy, don't be so impersonal and confusing," said

Joanna, vaguely anxious. "If *you* break through any resolution you have made, I hope you will tell *me*, but I don't know about other girls."

"Darling, I have," said he gravely, "broken through a resolution and wronged you, and I want to make you a confession. But first, whatever it is that I have to say, will you kiss me, my sweetheart?"

Joanna put her arms round his neck, without one moment's hesitation, thereby making his tale all the harder to tell.

"Can't you guess—can't you guess at all, little one, what I have to tell you?" he said, and to his surprise she answered unhesitatingly: "I think I can dear, and, perhaps, I shall not mind it so very much as you think."

The answer was not in the least what he had expected, and undoubtedly gave him a shock. He wanted her to mind, and to mind very much indeed.

"Do you mean that you guess what I was going to tell you, and that you do not mind?" he said shortly.

"Not that, dear. I do mind," said Joanna gently; "but, after all, as long as you are true to me in your heart I can forgive it—almost easily."

"Upon my word, Joanna," said he, sitting up very straight, "I had not the smallest idea that you were one of the advanced young women of the present day."

Poor Joanna was completely bewildered. "Don't you want me to forgive you, dear?" she said.

"Of course I am delighted," said Sir Nicholas, more coldly than he had ever spoken so her. "Look here, child; do you seriously mean that as long as my heart, as you say, is true to you, you don't care a straw what I do?"

"Perhaps I haven't guessed right," said Joanna in dismay; "but what I meant, dearest, was this: that while you love me and are sorry, I could forgive you even for breaking your promise to me and kissing some other girl—which I suppose you mean, but I don't say, darling, that it doesn't vex me a little, though I know in this house——"

"You could forgive me for kissing some other girl," said Sir Nicholas, looking at her very oddly. "God bless you, my little innocent sweetheart!"

But it would have been better for him, better, perhaps, too, for her, if she had been able to understand him.

But for the moment the whole warmth of his love for her had come back, and he felt that she was his one hope of being a better man.

"But the fact is, darling," he said, a little later, "Lady Florence has a kind of effect upon me——"

"Then it was Lady Florence that you kissed?" said Joanna, with for the very first time a small feeling of pain and jealousy.

She was sure, as sure as an uncharitable little girl of nineteen could be, that it was Lady Florence's fault.

"Yes, it was Lady Florence that I—kissed," said he, "and, darling, it is true enough that I had better keep clear of her."

There was a queer pain in Joanna's heart; an uneasy feeling, as if the whole world was changing to her.

"Don't look at me like that, my child," he said. "I have not changed to you. You couldn't understand, my sweet, thank God, the feeling that I have for her. Won't you look after me and keep me straight?"

"Nicholas," said Joanna in a very low voice, "I love you so well that if Lady Florence were not a married woman I could give you up to her easily, but——"

"Not another word, Joanna," said Sir Nicholas quickly. "There is nobody in the world but you that I care two straws about, and I wouldn't let you give me up if you wanted to. Try as much as you like, you shall never be free from me!"

At which she gladly drew closer to him, and was made to promise faithfulness all over again, and under that tree by the river all their old promises were made over again, till Sir Nicholas felt and said that there was no danger to him from Lady Florence.

His present sole anxiety was to marry Joanna at once, and he was twice as impatient and eager as he had ever been before. He would have been willing for any sacrifice which should at once enable him to marry. But there was no such immediate road to fortune.

Meredyth's offered agency was a year away, and the China plan, if it came to anything, meant that he could not bring Joanna out for some time.

He told her all his impatience, and before they parted, having done all he could to shake her trust, he made her promise to trust him absolutely.

And Joanna promised, meaning to keep her promise.

After which they said to themselves and each other that they were closer together than ever, and refused to recognise the vague something which had come between them.

Joanna had promised to trust him, when he had himself told her that he was not to be trusted, and Sir Nicholas vaguely felt that she had changed to him ever so little.

He was not at peace with himself when he was with her, annoyed by a certain tiresome feeling of guilt, and the consciousness that there was ever such a small flaw in her perfect belief in him.

From which an unacknowledged irritation grew up between them, which was very slight and often barely perceptible.

There are some breakages which, be they ever so slight, can never be entirely mended again.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Do not blame me if I doubt thee ;
I can call love by its name
When thine arm is wrapt about me,
But even love seems not the same
When I sit alone without thee."

"WHY so sad, oh, Joanna? Why this mournful countenance, my worthy Jo?"

"I have nothing to wear for the Hunt ball, and I have got a horrible cold in my head," said Joanna disconsolately.

She was sitting in the middle of the room, dismally surveying an array of wrecked dresses deposited limply on different chairs.

"I haven't got a single handkerchief left," said she dismally.

"Come, I can remedy that, at least," said Lady Hilda, patting her on the back with more goodwill than advantage, "and as for your next trouble——"

"Don't those dresses look awfully shabby," said Joanna, theatrically waving her hand towards them. "Do you think if I did—something—to that white striped thing I could wear it? Oh, Hilda, give me your advice."

"I should be ungrateful if I didn't when you are so prodigal in advice to me," said Lady Hilda amiably. "If you take my advice, you miserable little object—but I know you won't—you will stay at home."

"Oh," said Joanna in dismay, "stay at home!"

"Yes, my dear, stay at home, and in your room," said Lady Hilda unrelentingly. "What do you want at a ball, I should like to know, with a red nose and watery eyes, and a tendency to sneeze every five minutes?"

"Oh," said Joanna, "I couldn't stay at home, Hilda. I am to dance the first valse with Mr. Campbell, and then Nicholas——"

"Well, Nicholas!" said Lady Hilda. "Go and look at yourself in the glass, and then see if you think Nicholas can admire you. You'll do the wisest thing you ever did in your life by staying at home, but I am sure I don't know why I am wasting my breath, for I know you won't do it."

"It is ridiculous to talk like that, Hilda," said Joanna sharply. "If Nicholas can't put up with me with a cold, it is a very bad lookout for when we are married, for I am always having colds."

"Very well," said Lady Hilda. "'He that will to Cupar, maun to Cupar,' to quote your friends, the Campbells. But I assure you no man likes to be sneezed at, even literally. I will

send you in my carbolic smoke ball, and for God's sake, powder your nose ! That's all I can do for to-day, but if you are determined to go to the ball to-morrow—are you ?”

“ Well, if you think I could make that dress at all decent ? ”

“ If go you must, you can do me a favour. You remember that blue and silver stuff I showed you the other day ? Well, I am at my wits' end to know what to do with it ; it doesn't suit me and it won't suit you, but if you think you could do with it, my maid could easily run it up upon one of your foundations.”

“ Oh, Hilda, I can't——” began Joanna, when she was stopped by an outbreak of sneezing, in the middle of which Hilda ran out of the room, banging the door as usual after her.

Consequently, Lady Hilda was not a little annoyed when she found Sir Nicholas and Lady Florence suspiciously close together on the stairs, and when he went away she broke out hotly to her sister.

“ Can't you leave that conceited young fool alone, Florence ? ” she said ; “ upon my word his airs make me sick.”

“ What on earth does it matter to you ? ” said Lady Florence roughly.

“ It matters to me that you and Judith are doing your d——d best to make that little Miss Conway miserable,” said Lady Hilda with more energy than elegance. “ Can't I see how you are turning Nick's very silly head, and making him a still greater fool than Providence was able to do ? Can't I see you this evening, taking care to look your best, and to put yourself where he can't help comparing you with that unfortunate little girl, with her home-made frocks, and her face swelled with cold.”

Lady Florence laughed. “ The picture sounds enticing,” she said, “ but look here, Hilda, this I say and stick to. If you can get James to let me go up to town for the season as usual, I will let Nick go back to the little Irishwoman, but if I am left to find amusement for myself, find it I will.”

“ You know perfectly well that I have no influence with James,” said Lady Hilda shortly. “ And we both know of a little incident when Judith was a girl, which could make me able to stop her troubling anybody, only that she knows that I will never speak for Meredyth's sake—the best, truest, most honest man I know.”

“ Oh, everybody knows your opinion of Lord Meredyth,” said Lady Florence with a sneer.

“ How dare you speak to me like that ! ” cried Lady Hilda, flying away, to try to forget all about Joanna and her troubles in a saunter through the kennels with Lord Meredyth.

Lady Hilda liked to go among the hounds and have them all round her ; she took an interest in all that concerned

them, and did not object to enter into breeding details with the huntsman.

It was clear she could do nothing for Joanna, so what was the good of worrying over it?

So things went on as usual, and Nicholas appeased his conscience by giving Joanna presents, paid for out of his winnings at cards.

That same evening they had a small dispute about Lady Hilda herself.

"She is the only woman in the house that I care about," said Joanna.

"There's not a pin to choose between her and the rest," said Sir Nicholas. "If you heard the fellows talk about her in the smoking room at night."

"The more shame for them," said Joanna sturdily.

"If you had heard The Beattie's tale last night, about a house she stayed at in Scotland, where she borrowed a man's kilt, and went out shooting with him all day in it."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Joanna. "What did the man wear, then?"

"Don't be absurd, my dear child," said Sir Nicholas, kissing her, but speaking rather crossly nevertheless.

"We are not going to quarrel over Lady Hilda, you and I, are we?" said Joanna softly.

"No, darling, not over anything," said Sir Nicholas, with a tenderness which was a little forced.

"I know I am cross, dear," Joanna said apologetically. "I can't think what makes me feel so irritated. You are as nice as possible, but somehow I feel as if you were rubbing me up the wrong way."

And for his part, Nicholas wondered if it was because she had a cold in her head he felt so little inclined to make love to her this evening.

Then with compunction he said: "You won't be able to go out to-morrow, my pet, and it will be dull for you. Would you like me not to go to the meet, and to stay at home to keep you company?"

"And lose your day's hunting?" said Joanna. "Oh, not for the world, dear."

"And yet it might be the best thing that could happen to me," he returned gravely.

But when she ceased to press him to go, he was annoyed in turn, and with great inconsistency.

"Can't you trust me, then?" he said. "You who have promised to trust me. If you lose faith in me, it will be a bad day for me, Joanna."

"Aren't you a little unreasonable, dear?" said Joanna with a sigh.

It was the same with this as it had been before with gambling. She was to promise to take care of him and to guard him, and then, if she interfered, he was very much annoyed.

In the spur of his indignation he went off to look for Lady Florence.

"Where is your sister?" he said to Lady Hilda, whom he met on her way back from the kennels.

"I am sure I don't know," said Lady Hilda, in no amiable tone, "but if it is any satisfaction to you to know, I should like to take you and Florence and knock your silly heads together."

Which was a remarkably rude speech, even from Lady Hilda.

CHAPTER XXV.

"'Is it so?'

I said, . . . 'is the world so bad?
While I hear nothing of it through the trees;
The world was always evil—but so bad?'"

A LONG day in the house with a cold in the head, when everybody else is out, enjoying him or herself, is not exactly lively.

Joanna took every remedy suggested to her; she nearly sneezed herself away over the carbolic smoke-ball, she drank sal-volatile, and various home-made decoctions, and she refrained from water till she almost choked—all in hope of being well for the ball in the evening. She did not feel inclined to read or to write, or even to carve; she made up her mind to go to the ball and to stay at home several times an hour, and not even the sight of the blue and silver, rapidly coming into shape under the clever fingers of Lady Hilda's maid, was sufficient to cheer her. A long, admonitory letter from Mrs. Conway by the afternoon post completed her depression.

Mrs. Conway hoped that Joanna was careful to read the lessons every day, that she remembered that the devil was a ravening lion, going about seeking what he could devour, and that he had special opportunities in a house and among people given solely to society. She hoped her daughter was not neglectful of a word in season, and that she was ever mindful that the pleasures of this world are vain and fleeting. Also she might remember that Lord Meredyth had a good deal of property in Ireland, and that his present agent was going to Australia at the end of the year. If she had a chance to put in a word for her father she ought not to neglect it.

Joanna felt suddenly very forlorn and far away from every-

body and homesick ; she did not consider the pleasures of this world at all vain, but she felt that just at that moment she would have liked her mother to come and give her a hot drink and send her to bed, and tell her she could not possibly go to the ball, instead of being left to decide for herself. She had rejoiced so much in her liberty, and now she all at once felt a longing for somebody to order her about and to *belong* to her. Then she said to herself angrily that of course Nicholas belonged to her, more than anyone else in the world. In her secret heart she knew that Mrs. Conway would not have gone out and left her alone all day with a bad headache and a general feeling of misery ; no, she would have stayed at home, and in staying, worried Joanna almost to distraction.

She tried to think of Nicholas and enjoy his day, but somehow that didn't seem to go right any more than anything else.

“It is absurd to let a physical thing—a cold in the head—make me so miserable,” she said to herself ; “what should I do if I had not Nicholas to look forward to ?”

She crept down to the billiard room, and settled herself in an armchair by the fire. The over-mantle was carved by Grinling Gibbons, and was, she found, a “comfort to her.” She felt a degree less miserable when she sat there, pleasantly warm, with the carving to gaze at, and misty thoughts of Nicholas gradually growing more cheerful, and, presently a most unprecedented thing occurred—she fell asleep.

“Hullo ! Miss Conway, this is a surprise !” said somebody through her dreams, and Joanna woke up, startled, and feeling rather more miserable than when she had gone to sleep.

Lord Meredyth was standing over her in his red coat and splashed boots and breeches, and looking down upon her with his very nicest smile.

But she woke up like a child, half-frightened, and wholly perplexed as to where she was and what had happened to her.

“Nicholas ?” she said vaguely. “Is anything wrong ? What is the matter ?”

“Nothing at all is the matter, at any rate with Osborne,” said Lord Meredyth rather shortly. “Personally I had rather a cropper, but I am not much the worse except a bit of a shake. It is freezing hard now, and we were too long about stopping.”

“I am very sorry,” said Joanna, uncomfortably conscious that she had to open her mouth to breathe at all, and that speaking was quite a matter of difficulty. “How did it happen ?”

“My gee slipped on the other side of a little brook where some wet stones had been frozen, and went right over,” said Lord Meredyth. “Nothing is much damaged except my feelings, for the mare seems none the worse. I have just left her

enjoying a mash, and was going across to the smoking room when I saw you."

"Has Nicholas come in?" said Joanna, who was just at present a person of one idea, and who reflected that if Lord Meredyth's horse had slipped on a frozen stone, Sir Nicholas' might be no more sure-footed.

"I don't know, I hardly saw him during the day," Lord Meredyth said. "Are you going to the ball to-night, Miss Conway, because, if so, I think you ought to get ready. You know we dine in Windsor?"

"I don't know whether I shall go," said Joanna dolefully.

"Well, I must say you look awfully seedy," he agreed. "I daresay that you would be wiser to go to bed."

"I will go upstairs and see how I feel," said Joanna, getting up to discover that she ached all over. "You must wonder what I am doing here, but I like to sit and look at those panels, and wonder if ever, ever, I could do anything like them. To-night I feel that I should like to throw all my old rubbish in the fire. What time is it?"

"A little after six," said Lord Meredyth looking at his watch. "We must start at seven punctually, Miss Conway, for it is an hour's drive, and then we have to dine and be at the ball by half past nine, for the reception business."

Joanna went meditatively up to her room. Should she go or not?

There, on the bed, lay the blue and silver dress looking very different from anything she had ever worn before, and she might never have as good an opportunity of wearing it again. If she had only been able to see Nicholas, she was sure he would not have minded staying at home in the least, and they could have had a happy evening together; but she could not go to his room to look for him, and she felt shy about sending him a message through any of those imposing valets or footmen. So she decided that in gratitude to Lady Hilda and her maid she ought to go and wear that dress.

So she dressed, stopping to sneeze at intervals, with aching head and aching limbs, and though the blue and silver was very pretty in itself, she could not flatter herself that the result was good.

However, she was down and ready before seven, having powdered herself as well as she could and filled her pocket with handkerchiefs.

But there was no sign of Nicholas, no sign either of Lady Florence Delacque, a fact which Joanna would not have noticed or heeded a week ago, but which gave her a certain troublesome pang now.

She hesitated to ask for him, as nobody else seemed to trouble about his absence.

"How awfully ill you look, Jo," Lady Hilda said.

"I am sick of being told I look ill," said Joanna fretfully.

"Can't you say something newer for a change? I know it is only a polite way of telling me that I look ugly."

"Well, I can't truthfully say that you look pretty," said Lady Hilda dispassionately.

"I can't help that," said Joanna impatiently. "I didn't make myself."

"I should call it a very discreditable performance, if you had," said Lady Hilda, who prided herself on frankness with good reason. "You have every appearance of a hard drinker, and I can't say that that powder is artistically put on."

"It wouldn't stick," said Joanna dismally.

But she did not feel cheered by Lady Hilda's plain speaking.

And meanwhile, where was Nicholas? could any accident have happened?

"It is time to start," said Lady Meredyth. "Where is Nick? And, Mr. Delacque, do you know what is keeping Lady Florence?"

"Osborne has not come in," said Lord Meredyth, and everybody looked at Joanna; "I sent up just now to ask."

"Oh!" said Joanna, "can anything have happened?"

"I had a message from Florence about twenty minutes ago, to say that the frost had delayed them," said Mr. Delacque, a stout, burly person.

"Oh, yes, the frost of course," Lord Meredyth agreed hastily. "We need not wait then, Judith; I daresay they will come on to this affair later on."

And Joanna went with the rest, for the first time undeniably jealous.

She did not enjoy the dinner; she could neither eat nor talk, and it seemed to her endless. She did not enjoy the saunter of inspection through the almost empty ballrooms, and she was annoyed all the time by feeling how much she *could* have enjoyed it, if Nicholas had been there, and she had had neither cold nor headache.

She got into a retired corner to watch Lady Meredyth receive each arrival, and to hope against hope that each one was Nicholas.

Lady Meredyth was not a good hostess; she made marked differences in her greeting of people she did or did not like, and she received men much more warmly than their woman-kind.

She delayed a countess and her daughters in the effusiveness of her reception of Captain Digby-Grant, who was not at all grateful.

"I have kept you some dances," she said; "4 and 8 and 12—but you will see them marked on my programme."

"You are very kind," he said with languid insolence, "but I am not going to dance much this evening. I shall be delighted if you will give me—say number twelve."

And Lady Meredyth gave it to him, while Joanna, in her corner, felt she could have almost flung the programme in his face.

Lady Hilda passed on her partner's arm, and stopped to whisper: "Jo, if The Beattie takes you into supper, look out what he gives you to drink. They say he's an awful beast with girls," and somehow or other this seemed to put a finishing touch to her growing conviction of the wickedness of the world this evening. Mrs. Conway was quite right—pleasures were vain and fleeting.

The delinquents did not arrive till the evening was half over, looking very cheerful and not much ashamed of themselves.

"There was no way of getting back with unprepared horses," said Sir Nicholas.

"H'm; all the rest of us got back," remarked Lord Meredyth.

"So we stopped at a farm house, and eventually arrived at Merevale about half-past seven in a spring-cart," put in Lady Florence.

"I see," said Lord Meredyth drily. "I am glad to find you are getting duly careful, Osborne."

"I never went in for being reckless that I know of," said Nicholas sharply.

"I am going over to speak to Miss Conway, and apologise for keeping you, Sir Nicholas," said Lady Florence sweetly; "will you take charge of me across the room?"

And then she came to Joanna and smiled upon her and spoke to her most amiably.

"Miss Conway, I hope you are not very angry with me for keeping Sir Nicholas so long? You are not going to scold him?"

"Certainly not," said Joanna shortly. She was worn out, miserable, and cross, and she showed it.

"I am awfully sorry I have missed two of my dances with you," said Nicholas uncomfortably, "but I daresay you danced them, which was more fun. The next is ours, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Joanna, and then he turned away to Lady Florence, who had moved aside to speak to someone who wanted a dance.

"What are you going to give me?" he said.

"Oh, I haven't made up my mind to that," Lady Florence said; "I can't sit out with you when I have been with you all day. If you danced it would be different, but people will talk."

"Hang their talking!" said Sir Nicholas.

"Well, you can have the next, perhaps," Lady Florence said graciously.

"The next I am to have with Joanna; give me the one after, instead?"

"No, no, my friend; take the gifts the gods provide you with or go without," said Lady Florence; "that one is a square and I am to dance it with the Prince. Yes, Lord Molyneux—the 8th—with pleasure."

"Well, what are you going to give me?" said Sir Nicholas impatiently.

"The next, or none," said Lady Florence turning lightly away.

"You will drive me mad," Sir Nicholas said. "I tell you I am to have it with Joanna."

"Very well, take your choice," said Lady Florence suavely. "I am not yet reduced to pin my hopes on one partner. *Another* dance, Captain Digby? I am afraid I can't possibly manage it."

Sir Nicholas looked from Lady Florence to Joanna—from Lady Florence in her smart frock from Claud, to Joanna in the blue and silver, which did not suit her—from Lady Florence looking her best and prettiest, and half surrounded by a crowd of men clamouring for dances, to Joanna sitting all alone with *such* an unbecoming cold in her head.

"You know I must have a dance with you at any price," he said roughly to Lady Florence, whose eyes brightened with triumph, and then he went over to Joanna, speaking with an assumed nonchalance.

"You won't mind giving me the next dance instead of this one, will you, dear?" he said, and she answered: "Oh, no, not in the least," with lips that quivered in spite of all her efforts.

"You see it is the only one Lady Florence can give me, and it seems rather uncivil—don't you understand?" said Nicholas uneasily. "Why child, how ill you look! You are not taking to powder, are you? Rub that streak off your cheek this minute."

Joanna meekly obeyed.

Lord Meredyth was the only person who had noticed the whole performance, where he stood, leaning against the wall and waiting for the next dance to begin, and while the band was playing the first bars of the "Garden of Sleep" he walked across to Lady Hilda and said:

"Hilda, would you mind my throwing you over for this dance?"

"Delighted, I am sure," said Lady Hilda calmly; "as you know, like most people, I am rather partial to being thrown over, and don't think it at all rude."

"The fact of the matter is this: there's Osborne gaily dancing with your sister, and I know he was engaged to Miss

Conway. I think it would be a charity to dance with the girl; she looks awfully miserable."

"Has he chucked her—the—*beast*!" said Lady Hilda with energy, "yes, Meredyth, go and dance with her by all means. It is like you to think of it."

And she spoke very warmly indeed.

"And after that I think I shall go home, Hilda; that tumble shook me more than I fancied at that time."

Lady Hilda looked at him anxiously. "After all, perhaps you had better not bother with Joanna for to-night," she said. "Go home at once, or come and sit out with me, and you need not talk."

"Oh, nonsense! there's nothing to be anxious about. But I thought I would escape and have a rest, as you know I speak in the House to-morrow."

"Well, try and get that child to go home with you; she looks worn out," Lady Hilda said.

But though Joanna was glad enough to give Lord Meredyth the dance and be taken away from her lonely corner, she was not willing to go home. She was generally rather a sensible girl, but now, between illness and disappointment she had got into a state beyond reasoning with.

Go home, leaving Nicholas behind, she would not. There were his dances with her to be thought of, and then her promise to help him about Lady Florence. She was bewildered, worn out, and miserable, and her one clear idea was to stay while he did.

But her dances with him were not quite a success. He talked of anything but Lady Florence, and she dared not begin to speak of her for fear of bursting into tears or in some way betraying the misery of which she was ashamed. She had no thought of blaming Nicholas, but she wanted him to take her away from the rest, and then to take her in his arms, and tell her that she was very silly.

But he had no idea just then of doing any such thing; he had quite sufficient thoughts and fears and wishes of his own to engross him. Lady Florence had for the time being completely gone to his head. The excitement of the hunt, their long day together, their dark drive home in the spring-cart, and now the feeling that this woman, admired and sought after by everybody, belonged to him more than to anybody else—all this had put Nicholas' brain in a whirl. And then Joanna—Joanna to whom he had sworn a thousand times that he loved her for herself alone, and that no change, no disfigurement could change him—Joanna was looking very plain, and she was not at all amusing or pleasant.

Besides, worst of all, she awoke in him a vague sense of wrong this evening, which was very disagreeable.

So Nicholas hid his discomfort by flippancy, and he and Joanna rubbed each other up wrong the whole evening.

And so hour after hour of this ball which Joanna had looked forward to for a whole week and could have enjoyed so much, hour after hour went by till she thought it would never end.

People came and people went, but they went very slowly.

They went as they chose, for there was no chance of saying good-bye to Lady Meredyth, who had been invisible for the last hour or so.

The Campbells, who were good-natured boys, came to sit or dance with Joanna occasionally, but there was no doubt about it that she was exceedingly dull this evening,

And at last, at last, the room was cleared, Lady Meredyth turned up, and it was time to go.

But the sigh of relief which Joanna heaved when they stood together in the hall, about twenty of them, the very last even of their own party, was somewhat premature.

"What time is it?" said Lady Meredyth, in wild spirits. "Five o'clock? Now for Archie Lovett-Cairns' supper party."

"What, are you really going?" said Lady Florence, who was looking as fresh as ever with a blue shawl thrown over her fair hair, and a warm cloak which Nicholas had just helped her to put on.

"Going? I should think so! I said I would the moment I heard that Meredyth was going home early and would leave us a free field."

"Oh, what am I to do?" said Joanna, more to herself than aloud.

"Great Heavens, Miss Conway! I thought you had gone home hours ago," said Lady Meredyth in a disgusted voice. She had thought the party a select one of her own kindred spirits and intimates, and she took no trouble to conceal that she thought Joanna in the way.

"As you are here, I suppose you had better come," she said unwillingly.

"But I don't know Mr. Cairns——"

"I can't help that—unless you like to go home by yourself. Mr. Cairns, we are ready. Miss Conway wants to be introduced."

Mr. Cairns was a stout, red-haired, youngish man, with long, sensual eyes, and not the most flattering reputation. He had made rapid strides that night towards the place in Lady Meredyth's platonic affections so decidedly vacated by Captain Digby-Grant.

At another time Joanna would have thought nothing of asking Nicholas to take her home, but to-night was different.

Lady Meredyth did not care to bring her own carriages to

wait at Mr. Lovett-Cairns' door, so she sent them back to the hotel, and the party started through the streets on foot.

Joanna was too dazed and stupid by this time to care if she was out of it or not; she followed the rest, engrossed with only one idea, to keep them in sight: followed them, with aching head and legs, and feeling more ashamed and disreputable than she had ever felt in her life.

They whistled, they sang, they even executed a version of "Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay" in the middle of the empty street, waking up the neighbourhood and startling the policeman on his beat.

And Mr. Lovett-Cairns' supper-party was a performance such as Joanna had never even dreamed of; a scene where the men were all half drunk, and the women at least excited; a scene of license and disorder, which would have shocked these people themselves at a calmer moment.

She was admitted for the first time to Lady Meredyth's most intimate circle.

And Nicholas? Excited as he was, he would have given worlds to take Joanna away, and only the fear of ridicule restrained him.

They reached home in the daylight of an eight-o'clock March morning.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"He sat beside me, with an oath
That love ne'er ended, once begun;
I smiled—believing for us both,
What was the truth for only one."

NEXT day Joanna was really ill. She was shivering one minute and burning the next; she ached all over and could eat nothing.

She read over her diary, and decided that she was degenerating; that she did not mind things now that she had thought dreadful at first, and that her becoming like the rest was only a matter of time. She would not speak to Lady Hilda or look at her, and all she said to Lady Meredyth, who took the trouble of coming up several flights of stairs and along many passages, and was much impressed by her own kindness, was that she wanted to go home.

If Nicholas was to fail her, how was she to live in this house and among these strangers any longer?

And then she told herself over and over again that he had done nothing—nothing to make her fear that it was possible that he should fail her. Such a thing was beyond the limits

of possibility, and she was a wicked girl to let the smallest doubt creep into her heart.

Why, only the day before the ball he had told her that she was his forever, and that nothing—no length of time or no change in her should make him change, and after that, was she not the most faithless, unbelieving of girls to doubt the very next day?

She had heard and read of girls who could trust their lovers when everything seemed black against them, and now, where was all her faith in Nicholas gone? Gone, without any cause or reason whatever.

When he came to the door and asked to be let in, later on, she would have given worlds to see him, but something—Ballylone feelings and prejudices—held her back, and Nicholas went away wrathfully, calling her a little prude.

Whereupon Joanna, this weak, foolish Joanna of the last two or three days, began to cry helplessly to herself.

Nobody came near her till five o'clock, when Lady Hilda made her appearance, carrying in her own hands a little silver tray with tea and cakes neatly arranged on it.

"Now, Jo," she said, "be as disagreeable as you like, but don't sulk. I haven't had any tea, so you can't in charity refuse to let me have some with you here."

Lady Hilda looked as bright and fresh as if she had not gone to bed about nine o'clock in the morning. She had got up in time for lunch, after a comfortably sound sleep, and had been playing tennis ever since.

"My poor child, what a wreck you look," she said, drawing up a table to Joanna's bedside and beginning to pour out the tea. "You aren't up to these late hours, and I must say they do make the most of a dance in the country. You take sugar, don't you? You certainly need something to sweeten you to-day."

"I can't talk; my head is aching," said Joanna.

"You will feel better when you have expressed yourself, and I am not easily offended. Well, it was very rowdy and improper last night, wasn't it?"

"I can't say what I think about last night," said Joanna, turning her head away.

"Have a little tea-cake? It is delicious," said Lady Hilda. "And look here, Jo; whatever your feelings, like a good girl don't say anything to Lord Meredyth, or there'll be the devil to pay."

"I thought you liked Lord Meredyth, but you don't seem to mind deceiving him," said Joanna.

"All men have to be deceived for their own good," said Lady Hilda with conviction. "Do you think Meredyth knows one-half or one-quarter or one-third of what goes on in this

house? It is a bothersome world, Jo, and when you get into a certain way of going, it is very hard to get out of it. When I come to see you in Ballylone, you must try if you can improve me. Do you think I should astonish the natives?"

Astonish them? Joanna imagined Lady Hilda, with her long-handled eyeglass, her cigarettes, and her occasional oaths and startling stories, face to face with Miss Clarke and her mother, or strolling down the streets of Ballylone with her hands in her pockets.

She absolutely smiled at the idea, miserable as she felt.

"Have you seen Nick yet?" said Lady Hilda upon this sign of relenting.

"No; how could I?"

"Propriety, eh? Well, there's more than propriety in question just now. Take my advice and see him. I will lend you my pink tea-gown if you like."

"No, thanks," said Joanna. "If you think I could see him, my dressing-gown will do. Oh, Hilda, I do want him!"

"You little goose," was all Lady Hilda said, but she helped Joanna to get up and half dress, and brushed out her pretty, wavy hair, and established her in a chair over the fire while she went to look for Nicholas.

And Joanna vaguely felt that she was doing something slightly improper and entirely Bohemian and delightful.

Nicholas was very penitent and completely charming. He knelt in front of her, twisting his fingers through her hair, kissing her grave brown eyes, telling her that he loved her dearly, and altogether proving himself the most satisfactory of lovers.

Joanna's vague fears and miseries vanished at once, and she felt ashamed to confess them.

"Darling, I must tell you, as I promised to tell you everything," she said, "I had all sorts of horrid thoughts in my head. You must forgive me, for it was because I was not well, or I should never, never, have felt the smallest little doubt."

But his answer was not quite what she had expected.

"I don't know exactly what to say to you about last night, my child," he said. "I don't know what came over me—it was a madness. But it is all right now, my sweet, and you need not be afraid, if you love me—you do love me, don't you?"

It was the same thing over and over again; Nicholas was trying to hold himself to Joanna with words.

He was very angry when she said: "But, dear, if things are like that, how am I ever to be anything but uncertain?" and in the end there were more promises of trust and everything was satisfactory.

But it is impossible to trust a man by sheer force of determination when he has proved himself untrustworthy.

Joanna was admittedly happy when he was with her, and unadmittedly anxious when he was away from her, and the slight, almost imperceptible, rift between them became every day more hard to ignore.

CHAPTER XXVII.

“She'll not be thwarted by an obstacle
So trifling as—her soul is—much less yours !
Is God a consideration?—she loves you,
Not God ; she will not flinch for Him. Indeed
She did not for the Marchioness of Perth,
When wanting tickets for the fancy ball.
She loves you, Sir, with passion, to lunacy,
She loves you, like her diamonds—almost.”

LORD MEREDYTH was a young man with every intention of getting on in life and making himself of use in the world.

In his father's lifetime he had knocked about a good deal, had gone as aide-de-camp, first to Australia and then to India, and had finally returned to London and gone into Parliament.

There he had made a certain mark, as a promising young fellow, with troublesome enthusiasms which would wear off. He had taken up Home Rule for Ireland with great energy, and as a protest against absenteeism, had gone to live for a year on his property in the West, after which he had honestly confessed to a change of mind, and had taken up the opposing side almost as hotly. He had interested himself in the poor and the housing of the poor, and had gone round to all the workhouses and a good many of the cottages in his county.

Then had come his father's death, which had placed him in the House of Lords, and given him cottagers of his own to look after.

He set to work to pull down, to build, and to alter ; he attended parish meetings and sessions with a commendable regularity, and he was ready to speak, and usually to speak well, whenever he was asked.

He had also taken a place of his own in the House of Lords, and people spoke of the Cabinet as a fairly certain prospect.

Consequently, with the Mastership of the County Hounds in addition, and a troublesome conscientiousness, which made him determined to put his very best work into everything, Lord Meredyth had plenty of scope for the immense vitality and energy which some people considered a virtue and others a fault.

He had married Miss Osborne, to whom he had been engaged for years off and on, soon after his father's death.

Old Lord Meredyth had flatly declined to have anything to do with the Osborne family, but his son was fully as obstinate, and would have married Judith then in despite of anybody had she chosen.

But Miss Osborne had nobly declared that she would never marry him without his father's consent, which praiseworthy sentiment, translated into plain English, meant that though in any case he was an excellent match for her, she fully appreciated the difference that a disagreement with his father might make. So they waited, and in the meantime old Lord Meredyth died.

So, as his opposition was no longer of any avail, his son forthwith married Miss Osborne and reigned in his stead, and there were such doings at Merevale now as would have made the hair of the old earl or his quiet, home-loving wife stand on end.

The present Lord Meredyth was an active, purposeful, busy man, but he was inclined to be a little easy-going as regarded his wife.

If she had disappointed him, he never said so, even to her, and he let her go very much her own way, but he was a good deal away from home, and he had no idea what her own way really was. Frankness was not a distinguishing virtue of the Osborne family, and Lady Meredyth considered it by no means necessary to tell her husband everything.

And as a husband, he was perhaps a little too careless; a little too disinclined to trouble himself to draw out such good as there was in Judith.

They really saw very little of each other in private—it was quite a rare event for them to find themselves alone together during the day.

Two days after the Hunt Ball this rare event did happen. They met in the conservatories, where Lady Meredyth was selecting the flowers she wished to wear in the evening, under protest from the gardener, who preferred to send in what he pleased.

Lord Meredyth was still not entirely himself after his accident, and he had been taking a quiet day in consequence, and now having something to say to his wife, he had sought her out, to give utterance to his annoyance with Nicholas.

He emphatically did not like Nicholas, and he was not the kind of man to have patience with his vacillations. He had borne many things in silence from his wife, but he did not think it at all necessary to bear with his brother-in-law, and he said so, coming to the point at once.

“Osborne must either be willing to work or to go to the

workhouse, and they would not let him be idle even there," he said grimly. "I am not going to take any trouble unless I know it will be of some use, and I don't believe he is ever of the same mind two days running."

Lady Meredyth shrugged her shoulders, and debated between a pink and a crimson geranium.

"He's out of his senses about Florence Delacque just at present."

"More shame for him to insult Miss Conway when he has brought her over here as his engaged wife."

"Can you wonder, when he sees on one side a little bundly girl with a red nose, who is always sniffing——"

"Now, Judith—justice!" said Lord Meredyth, laughing, "Miss Conway had a very bad cold, and neither you nor I nor Lady Florence are exempt from colds that I know of. I like her very much—she is a sensible, clever girl, and sometimes says very amusing things."

"Oh, yes, I know you and Hilda have taken her up. I am going to the orchid house, Jack, if you have anything more to say."

Lord Meredyth was always pleased when she called him Jack, and he followed her, pulling to pieces a much treasured geranium of the gardener's, which he had plucked in absence of mind.

"I would say nothing if he broke with the girl like a man," he went on; "it would be a shabby sort of affair, but it is his own business."

"Oh, Nick is a kind of sultan—he likes quantity," said Lady Meredyth, laughing.

"Well, he's not going to act sultan in *my* house. Judith, you must put a stop to it."

"My dear boy, what am I to do? Who am I to turn out? Nick, or Lady Florence?"

"My dear Judith, you are not the woman I take you for if you can't manage it very easily," said Lord Meredyth, smiling. "Remember, you told me, to begin with, that though you didn't care to ask Lady Florence to put off her visit, you were sure that when you casually told her that Nicholas was here that she would do so herself."

"Jack, I wish to goodness you would look where you are going. There wasn't the smallest necessity to walk into that flower-pot. I wish you would go and express your feelings to Nick or to Florence instead of scolding me."

"Oh, if you call this scolding——"

"Well, I am sure I don't know what I am to do. You see Florence is naturally flattered to have a handsome, smart young fellow hanging after her, and then I always fancy she is fond of Nick, and doesn't care to lose him; and Nicholas is

flattered when he finds himself preferred to so many other people, and so they go on flattering each other, and—isn't this a queer orchid? it has got a most remarkable name that would take some weeks to say, so I call it 'Piggy,' which is something like the beginning, for short."

"But look here, Judith, Osborne has been here for some time, and the Delacques too. I don't wish to be inhospitable, but Hilda says——"

"And how long has Hilda been here, I should like to know?"

"I am sure I haven't the smallest idea, but that, like the other, is a question for you to decide."

"She is mad about a midnight steeple-chase she wants to ride," said Lady Meredyth conversationally. "What do you think about it, this next moonlight?"

"I think that it won't be ridden on my horses," said Lord Meredyth calmly, "nor by me, as I have no wish to break my neck at present. But about the Delacques, Judith——"

"Great Scott, Meredyth, when God made you he made a very obstinate man! Well, if you won't say another word about it to-day, I'll speak to Florence, or Nicholas, or somebody. And now, as you won't look at my orchids, let us go back to the rest, for I am sure you have been standing long enough. You are quite lame still."

But all the same, nobody spoke to Nicholas, except Joanna, who suggested one day that they had been a long time at Merevale.

On the whole, he would have been rather pleased if somebody had come forward to make up his mind for him. There was never a time in this young man's life when he had not wanted to do or to have at least two totally incompatible things at once. Now, he wanted to keep both Lady Florence and Joanna, and, as he could not make up his mind which he wanted the most, he had rather an uncomfortable time of it, and he found his position growing more difficult every day.

Lady Florence was exacting,—exceedingly exacting,—but then she was very pretty and smart, and knew how to flatter him to the top of his bent. He sometimes pictured to himself the consternation, envy, and admiration his elopement with one of the London beauties would create, the triumph and *éclat* for him; whereas, under no circumstances could his marriage with Joanna bring him *éclat*, and it could not possibly take place for years.

There was as much flattered vanity as passion in Sir Nicholas' relations with Lady Florence. That she should further complicate matters by seriously falling in love with him was an idea which he had hardly contemplated at first,

but it was gradually presenting itself to him, and flattering and perplexing him at the same time.

Whatever he eventually decided, a practical difficulty stared him in the face, which was want of money.

On Monday there was a dance at Merevale, a dance where Lady Florence was the undisputed beauty of the evening, and where she showed equally indisputable favour to Nicholas.

After the first few dances they went to sit out together on a couch in the billiard room, where they could just faintly hear the distant band in the hall.

Lady Florence was in blue, her favourite colour, with blue ribbons in her hair, matching her eyes, and making her look wonderfully young and girlish. She established herself very carefully, with a background of pillows, half lying, half sitting; the diamonds on her dress and fastening the ribbons in her hair shone even in the shaded light.

Sir Nicholas sat and looked at her with his expressive dark eyes, finding her very lovely, very fascinating, very altogether desirable.

"You are very sweet to-night," he said.

"It is all so nearly over," said Lady Florence, with a genuine sigh.

"Over?"

"Yes, over. I am sorry—I admit I am sorry; but as for you, you have had your amusement——"

"Florence!" said Nicholas. She had very pretty well-shaped, white arms, and she let him take her hand without resistance.

"Well," said Lady Florence, "it is quite true. All this has been a pleasant little episode to you and cost you nothing. What does it matter that the remembrance of it will make James twice as hard with me when we are buried in Northumberland? I have been a fool, and I shall suffer for it—that's all."

"Don't say that!" said Nicholas roughly. "Do you think I am not miserable?"

"You will not be difficult to console," said Lady Florence; but though her words were reproachful, her tone was very soft, and she let him draw very close to her. "Do you remember the days when you swore nothing should ever come between us? You were consoled then—very soon."

The temptation was too strong for Nicholas' passionate, pleasure-loving mind; he drew her to him, unresisting, and held her, with a long kiss upon her lips.

"Nothing *shall* come between us," he said. "I can't let you go——"

"What else can you do? You will soon be a married man, with other interests——"

"Never—never ! Florence, darling, there has been too much between us for it to end like this."

"Don't speak like that. You only make the good-bye, which must come, worse," said Lady Florence, very low; but she said it with his arms round her, her head on his shoulder, and his kisses on her lips.

"By God, there shall never be good-bye between us !" said Nicholas, in a shaken voice. "Darling, if you love me, let me take you with me. You shall be always mine—I shall kiss these sweet lips——"

Lady Florence drew a long breath. She was so tired of everything—tired for the time of being admired and sought after—very tired of her husband, and the prospect of a lonely summer in Northumberland, and, after her own fashion, she was in love with Sir Nicholas.

"Oh, Nicholas, don't tempt me—don't tempt me !" she said; but she did not draw herself away from him.

He was excited entirely beyond his own control, and Joanna was forgotten. He swore a passionate oath that nothing should come between them—nothing—not God in heaven Himself—should take Lady Florence from him.

For the time being everything and everybody else was blotted out from his mind.

Later on, in his own room that night, with a pipe in his mouth, and a tumbler of whiskey and water beside him, he came down to earth with a run. To carry off one's neighbour's wife requires money, like most other things in the world, and Lady Florence would certainly expect to be run away with comfortably.

Nicholas turned out his desk and his pockets, and assembled twenty-eight pounds, fifteen and sixpence, which seemed scarcely a satisfactory income on which to start life. He had overdrawn at Cox's already, and with a view to borrowing money it was necessary to offer some security, and at least to make the lender think there was some prospect of his being paid.

And then—poor little Joanna!

On consideration, he was inclined to put the blame of all that had happened on fate. He had not been at all anxious to come to Merevale himself, and he had certainly had no idea of meeting Lady Florence there. In this was the hand of fate most assuredly, comfortably taking the blame off Nicholas Osborne's shoulders. What was to be must be, and it was evidently pre-ordained that he was to spend his life with Lady Florence and not with Joanna.

And so deciding, he made up his mind to leave it once more to fate.

He had almost thirty pounds in his pocket, and to-morrow

he would go up to a certain small baccarat club he knew of in London, and either lose the money he had or win sufficient to take him out of the country comfortably. It was a hundred chances to one that he should lose, and if he did he would leave Merevale at once—he had at least got his return ticket to Ballylone—take Joanna with him, and devote himself to learning the agency business with a view to accepting Lord Meredyth's offer.

If he won—why then he would know that there was no God in heaven who cared for what happened here on earth—only a fate that there was no use fighting against.

Nicholas drank off his tumbler, and filled it again with a hand that shook a little.

"Poor little Joanna!" he said, half aloud. Something seemed to tell him that there would soon be reason to pity her.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"All's over, then; does truth sound bitter
As one at first believes?"

"TREMENDOUS run of luck Osborne had to-night."

"Yes; he played as if the devil was on his side, and when I said so he looked at me and said I might be more right than I thought."

"Well, I know if I hadn't had a return ticket I should have been in a bad way," said young Campbell, with a yawn; "but all the same, I wouldn't be in Osborne's shoes just now."

"It was a very unpleasant scene. Had you ever suspected him of not being on the square?"

"Well, I had heard talk, you know. The way he cleared out of the guards was rather fishy."

"I had never heard a word," said Santon, of the Foreign Office; "but I suppose it must be true, or Sylvain would hardly have spoken out like that. It seems they had made him promise to drop baccarat."

"An Osborne's promise is a fragile thing," said The Beattie, who did not share the admiration for Lady Meredyth which made Mr. Santon inclined to be lenient.

"He'll hardly care to stop on here, after an exposé like that," said Mr. Santon.

"But I believe he was playing quite straight to-night," young Campbell said. "I only lost a couple of ponies to him, and I believe I lost them fair enough, and don't grudge them. Good-night, you fellows. I think Sylvain might have held his tongue."

Sir Nicholas in his room was very miserable.

He had begun to forget the sword hanging over his head, and to hope that he might live his life without coming across the few men who knew his story. And he had played honestly enough; his fate—his whole life hung on the issue; and when he found himself 'winning, always winning,' he staked recklessly, and almost wished to lose. He had thought nothing of his promise; it was such a promise, he had argued, as was made to be broken; a compulsory promise, which no one could expect him to keep, and which was kept in the spirit as long as he continued to play fairly.

He was very angry with Cecil Sylvain, who had been his subaltern, and who joined to his romantic name complete incapacity and a tendency to get drunk every night. None of the others, Nicholas knew, would have spoken without warning, would have disgraced him publicly without giving him a chance.

If the opportunity of doing Sylvain an ill turn ever came Nicholas Osborne's way, he would not neglect it, and at the time he could have gladly killed him.

But the thing was done, deciding his fate beyond hesitation. He could not remain at Merevale another day, he could not face Joanna with the thing which she might learn any moment hanging over him, while with Lady Florence he might be far enough away from England before the story became public property. For Joanna he was very sorry, but the wrong-doing lay between Cecil Sylvain and fate, and he had already persuaded himself that he would never have left her had the exposure that evening meant anything less than ruin.

And all this time Joanna was sleeping soundly, without any presentiments, and dreaming that she and Nicholas were back at Ballylone. She awoke too next morning, without a shadow on her mind, and welcomed the departure of her cold with a light heart.

It was a bright airy day—a day to make anybody feel cheerful, and it completely suited Joanna's frame of mind.

She and Nicholas would have a nice, comfortable talk, and after that, all would be right, and that day week they would be once more at Ballylone.

She was not depressed, though Nicholas did not appear all morning. She knew he had been late last night, and that he was given to laziness. She did not notice that people looked at her oddly, as the *fiancée* of a man who had been openly declared a cheat and a swindler. Nobody was surprised that he did not show himself in public; those who knew him best knew he was not a man to brazen things out when they were going against him.

His non-appearance at lunch meant nothing either; Nicholas very often did not take lunch.

Joanna went off cheerfully to join a set of tennis, and then came back to say good-bye to the Campbell twins, who were leaving.

There was a mock-melancholy parting, a good deal of laughing, and an offer from Kenneth to carry any message Joanna liked to Lord Dawley, who had gone about a week before. The twins had liked her, and found her excellent company, and they were sorry for her.

But she was not at all sorry for herself.

She gaily accepted an offer of instruction in billiards from Mr. Santon, only stipulating for time to run upstairs and change her tennis shoes, and hoping that Nicholas would turn up in the billiard room.

On the way to her room she met a servant, who gave her a note.

"Johnston said Sir Nicholas Osborne told him to send you this at five o'clock, Miss," the maid said, looking at her curiously.

The servants knew and guessed more than anyone else just at present.

"Oh, thanks," said Joanna. "Is Sir Nicholas in his room?"

"No, I think he has gone out, Miss."

Joanna went on to her room to get rid of her tennis racquet, and read her letter in comfort. Nicholas had often sent her notes, making appointments with her, and she concluded that this was one, and reflected that it was a bother that she had promised to play with Mr. Santon.

But he had never sealed his notes before, and this made her vaguely curious.

She tore it open, and began to unlace one of her tennis shoes as she read, but the very first words startled her.

"Dear Joanna :"

Never had he written to her like that before.

"Dear Joanna :

"I don't know how to write to you—I can't ask you to forgive me——"

Joanna grew very white, and drew a sharp breath; but still she had no idea of the truth, only that he must again have broken some of his promises. It all came to her in the next sentence :

"I have loved you very dearly, and I do love you still, but something, as you know, has come between us. I feel myself a brute and a villain to write to you like this. If there was

any chance—any hope—if either of us had any money—
 Forgive me for saying it, but I see now that such a hasty
 engagement was a mistake.”

It was a hard letter to write—a letter that no man could
 have made a good one, and Nicholas had found it very diffi-
 cult to come to the point, to declare himself a scoundrel in so
 many words. In the end the thing had been said very
 abruptly and baldly.

“I have left here with Lady Florence Delacque. I know I
 shall go to the devil, and I deserve it for deserting my guar-
 dian angel. Don’t waste a thought on me—try and forget that
 such a brute ever existed. I daren’t read over what I have
 written, or I should tear it up. I daren’t even say God bless
 you.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

“All this and more comes from some young man’s pride
 Of power to see,—in failure and mistake
 Relinquishment, disgrace, on every side—
 Merely examples for his sake,
 Help to his faith untried.”

“Jo, are you aware that Mr. Santon has been waiting for
 you till he foams at the mouth? Let me in, child.”

“Hilda, is that you? Are you by yourself?”

“Quite, quite alone—no joke on the tapis. Are you going
 to open the door?”

“No, I can say what I have to say without.”

“What a nice, hospitable girl you are?”

“It isn’t a joke. Nicholas——”

Joanna’s voice broke off and came to a dead stop.

“Well, what about Nicholas?” Lady Hilda said. “It’s
 rather cold in this passage, I must say.”

“Nicholas—oh, I can’t say it!”

Then for the first time Lady Hilda took alarm.

“He—has—gone away with your sister,” said Joanna’s
 voice very slowly. “There—don’t speak to me—please go
 away!”

There was a silence. Lady Hilda turned very white, and
 all the careless good humour left her face.

“Oh, Joanna, Joanna, let me in,” she said.

“No, I don’t want you,” Joanna said impatiently; “go
 and tell whoever has to be told. I suppose Mr. Delacque
 ought to know.”

"But I can't leave you like this, my poor little Joanna. Let me in for one moment."

"I can't talk to you. Please don't bother," Joanna said, and further answer Hilda could not get.

She went away when she found it was useless to remain, went away, betaking herself almost instinctively to Lady Meredyth's room, where she found that lady having a comfortable rest with a novel over the fire, preparatory to dressing for dinner.

"Well, Hilda," she said resignedly, "if the lock of that door still survives, would you mind shutting it after you? Great Scott! what is the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Nick Osborne has gone off with Florence," Lady Hilda said abruptly.

Lady Meredyth shrieked faintly.

"Good gracious, how you startled me! Don't talk such rubbish—it's impossible!"

"It's true enough. I have just heard from Joanna Conway, who ought to know. Where's Meredyth?"

"Hilda, don't be so overwhelming," said Lady Meredyth, with a scared face. "Florence would not be such a fool, and Nick has no money."

"I can't help it. Miss Conway told me, and it is not probable that she was joking. Where's Meredyth? I sent a message to the billiard room for him."

"I daresay he is there. Hilda, you have taken away my breath. What is to be done? Is it too late for somebody to go after them and stop the scandal somehow? Good gracious, what will Meredyth say to me, and I am sure it is not my fault!"

"Nicholas Osborne is a cowardly scoundrel," said Lady Hilda, who never measured her words, "and as for Florence—Someone must tell James Delacque."

"And with the house full of people. Really it is most disgraceful and wicked and—and—annoying!" Lady Meredyth ended as a climax.

Then there was a tap at the door, and Lord Meredyth entered, still in shooting coat and knickerbockers, and there was the whole sorry tale to tell over again.

They looked at each other with consternation and dismay. There was not much use in words—not even much to be done in the way of action.

Lady Meredyth was the first to speak again, with a cry of dismay.

"And Nicholas has left Miss Conway on our hands! Good gracious, how very inconsiderate! What is to be done?"

"His conduct has scarcely been marked with consideration," said Lady Hilda bitterly.

"She must go home at once—at once, or we may never get her out of the house," Lady Meredyth went on anxiously. "Jack, get a Bradshaw, and look up the trains. It is the last time Nicholas enters this house."

"It is," said Lord Meredyth quietly. "Who is to go to that poor girl and find out what she wishes to do? Judith?—or Hilda, you are her greatest friend here. She has been grossly insulted in this house."

"I can't go—possibly," Lady Meredyth said. "I have seen very little of her, and I must dress for dinner. At any rate, I am upset enough already. Such an unpleasant thing to happen. Florence can't expect me to recognise her after this—I won't do it."

"I am—ashamed to go to her," Lady Hilda said in a low voice. "Florence is my sister."

"She ought not to be left like this," Lord Meredyth said. "I will go and look up the trains. I fancy one leaves Sunninghill for Stranraer between nine and ten to-night, and we might just catch it. That is, if she wishes to go at once, as I should think she will."

"For goodness' sake do persuade her to go at once," said Lady Meredyth fretfully.

"Judith!" was all Lord Meredyth said, but he looked appealingly at Lady Hilda.

"Yes, I will go," she said; "but she may not see me. She would not see me before."

"It may be all just a jealous fancy the girl has got into her head," Lady Meredyth suggested sharply.

"You may be sure I shall make it clear," said her husband. "Thank you, Hilda. Will you come to me in the study afterward?"

Lady Hilda walked slowly upstairs again. How was she to face this girl, who owed such a cruel insult to her sister? But she was a resolute young woman, and she did not hesitate for an instant, or pause till she had knocked again at Joanna's door.

There was no difficulty about admission this time; the door was unlocked, and Joanna said "Come in" at once.

The girl was moving about the room with sudden, restless change of position; she was neither faint nor in tears, and except that she was absolutely colourless she looked very much as usual—very much as she had looked two hours ago when she ran gaily upstairs, racquet in hand.

"It was good of you to come back, Hilda," she said; "I was going to send to you. I have been wondering if I could get away from here to-night."

"Meredyth is looking up the Stranraer trains," said Lady Hilda nervously. She seemed all at once held at a distance

and silenced by Joanna's complete composure. Words that she wished to say would not come, and after all, what possible comfort could she or anybody else give to Joanna?

"I could pack very quickly."

"But you will be tired——" Lady Hilda ventured.

"Don't be silly, I am not so easily tired."

"Let me send my maid, and you can rest; or let me pack?"

"No, I don't want to rest. Why should I? I am not ill," said Joanna sharply. "Hilda, what should I give the servants? Oh, *don't* look at me like that!" she cried suddenly, stamping her foot.

"Joanna, am I not to say a word?" said Lady Hilda, meekly drying her eyes.

"No," said Joanna in a hard voice. "Please find out about the trains. My return ticket is by Fleetwood."

"Oh, what does that matter?" Hilda burst out.

"I suppose it is too late to telegraph to-night?" said Joanna, beginning to disentangle the contents of her drawers, which, characteristically, were in dire confusion. "Hilda, I am sorry to be so troublesome, but will you see about a strong cord for that box? I don't—much—want the maid in."

Lady Hilda went over to Joanna's big box, tugged at it a little till she pulled it half out of its corner, and then pushed it back again.

"Oh, Joanna!" she said, "I can't bear it—I can't go on just as if things were all right."

"You must go away, then, please," said Joanna, on her knees before her chest of drawers; then she turned round and looked at Hilda for a minute, with something in her brown eyes which had never been there before.

"Hilda, don't worry," she said more gently. "I don't think I even mind much yet. I don't believe it."

"Joanna, is it possible that there is some mistake? Is there any doubt——"

"No, it is perfectly true. I know it is perfectly true, but all the same I don't believe it," said Joanna, turning away to her packing again.

"Let me help you," Lady Hilda volunteered recklessly, having never packed for herself in her life.

"If you do, you must talk about something else—tennis or hunting or something," said Joanna over her shoulder, but, though Hilda religiously tried her best, the conversation flagged exceedingly.

Presently, after a long silence, Joanna, who was sitting on the floor, packing her hat-box, said: "It is very curious, Hilda, but, I don't feel anything—anything at all, except a real, physical pain at my heart. If you did not know, I

could laugh and talk just as usual, and though I repeat it over and over to myself I *can't* make myself believe it. If you look as if you were sorry it will drive me wild—it is for *me* to be sorry."

"But, she is—my sister," said Lady Hilda in a low voice.

"Don't!" said Joanna, in a voice of sharp pain.

And then Lady Hilda was silent again, fearing that words might do more harm than good; but, indeed, just then they could do neither one nor the other.

A little later she went to find Lord Meredyth, leaving Joanna to finish her packing by herself.

"Well?" he said.

"She wants to go at once."

"All right. The Stranraer train leaves Sunninghill at 9.53 this evening and reaches Stranraer at half-past six to-morrow morning. Miss Conway must be ready at nine."

"But, Jack, you can't send that child on a night journey."

"I shall take her, naturally. We reach Larne at half-past eight, and I shall wire from there to her father to meet us in Belfast; or for that matter I could take her right on."

"But, Jack, you were going to speak to-morrow?"

"It can't be helped. I have ordered some dinner for myself here, and told them to send something to Miss Conway's room; she must eat something before we start. Is she awfully upset?"

"She is not at all upset," said Lady Hilda, "and I don't know in the least what to say to her. I am an awful duffer when people are in trouble. Don't knock yourself out, Jack; you are not half right yet after that fall."

"Nonsense, my dear girl; don't make me out so soft as that. Will you tell Miss Conway?"

"Yes, I will go," Lady Hilda said, but she lingered. "I shall not be here when you come back, Meredyth," she said.

"I suppose you are right," he returned, with a short sigh.

Then came a hurried putting together of Joanna's belongings, and a hasty attempt on her part to eat something.

They went off while everybody else was at dinner; went off in the dark, with a light rain falling; a kind of night which seemed to Joanna appropriate.

She had said good-bye to nobody, not even to Lady Meredyth, and only Lady Hilda and a couple of footmen came to see them off.

"Shall I never see you again, Joanna?" Lady Hilda said.

But Joanna neither knew, nor just then cared much.

Then there was a very warm hand-clasp between Lord Meredyth and Lady Hilda. He swung himself up to the

driving-seat, and she stood upon the steps alone, straining her eyes after them as they disappeared into the darkness.

She turned back into the warm hall with a heavy sigh, and the footmen closed out the darkness.

CHAPTER XXX.

“Never any more
While I live
Need I hope to see his face
As before.”

As long as she lived Joanna never forgot that sudden, strange night journey.

Lord Meredyth made her as comfortable as he could with rugs and hot water bottles, and she lay very quietly where he had placed her all through the night. He dozed at intervals, always waking up to find her quite still in her corner, with patient, wide-open eyes looking straight in front of her. He remembered how gay and happy she had been when she came to Merevale. Was there no punishment for Nicholas Osborne for this thing that he had done? Was he to escape entirely free? With the girl's white face before him, Meredyth would have believed nothing too bad for Nicholas.

He himself could do nothing for her; nothing except suggest occasionally that she must be cold or hungry, or draw the rugs more closely round her, and alter the position of the hot-water tin; attentions for which she thanked him, but which rather bothered her than otherwise.

What was she thinking of all through the night, he wondered, while she lay there with that far-away look in her eyes? Was she burning with wounded pride and anger, or full of a despair too deep for other thoughts?

But just then Joanna was feeling nothing in particular, except intensest self-pity, and that extremely substantial physical heartache. She was sorry for herself, and, interested in her own troubles, she viewed her composure with a certain satisfaction and admiration, all as if the girl who was to suffer was somebody else. She felt this girl to be a person of some importance and interest in the dignity of her grief, and that little extra attentions and observances were her due. But how could it be herself? She who, in all her life, had never had a trouble worse than a Zenana meeting on a sunny day?

Yet it was true—quite true—that Nicholas had left her, and she would never see him again as long as she lived. And what was worse, it was true that he did not love her any longer.

She repeated the words to herself over and over again, but

it was no use—she could not believe it. Never to see Nicholas again, who had sworn not three days ago to be true to her till death should part them; who had told her again and again that nothing could come between them now, and who was connected with everything that Joanna thought or cared or dreamt about? Say to herself what she liked, reason and logic notwithstanding, she could not shake off the conviction that it was only some very evil dream, that that heartache would soon go away as all the little worries of her life had gone.

The rumbling of the train vaguely soothed her, as she sat there, thinking and feeling nothing in particular, except that she wanted Nicholas to take her in his arms and say it was all nonsense, and that she was not to worry.

It was a dreary business getting on board the boat in the darkness of a March morning, after the first completely sleepless night Joanna had ever spent in her life. She looked very white and strange in the light of the saloon, and the helpless, stunned look in her eyes made Meredyth very anxious. He had a misty idea that she ought to be made to cry, but how to set about it, and what he should do if he succeeded, he had not the faintest idea.

He selected a sheltered corner of the deck, where he could establish himself in moderate comfort with a thick coat and a pipe, and there he worried his head over Joanna, and cursed Nicholas to himself till they reached Larne.

Then he put out his pipe and went to look for Joanna, whom he found patiently and indifferently waiting where he had left her.

"We are just in, Joanna," he said, calling her, quite unconsciously, by her name; "I want to ask you, would you like me to telegraph to your father or your mother to meet us in Belfast, or would you like me to take you straight on? I am quite at your service."

"I should like my father to come," said Joanna, after a moment's consideration.

"Very well. We shall be in Belfast a little after nine, and we can wait there till your father arrives."

"I am giving you such a lot of trouble," she said.

"I don't call this a trouble; but, if it were, I should consider it my distinct duty to do anything I possibly could," said Meredyth gravely, hesitating about an allusion to Nicholas. "You won't care now, Miss Conway, but will you promise me that if ever I—or Judith—can be of use to you, you will let us know, as a matter of course?"

"Oh, thank you; you have always been kind to me," said Joanna indifferently.

Then came the landing, and another short train journey,

ending with breakfast in the Avenue Hotel in Belfast, where the arrival of a real, indisputable English earl was not an everyday occurrence, and created rather a sensation.

"What will you do now, Joanna?" Meredyth asked. "Will you come out, or shall I take a room for you where you can rest? Your father can't be here till after three, I see."

"Thanks," said Joanna. "If you don't mind, I won't go out."

So all he could do for the time being was to establish her in a comfortable room, and later on to lunch with her and relate his exploration of the streets. He had gone to Robinson & Cleaver's and laid in a supply of shirts, after which he had been reduced to looking in at the shop windows in absolute despair, till he had suddenly run across a man in the Rifle Brigade that he knew, and by him had been charitably taken into the Ulster Club, where he had promised to dine that evening before going on board his boat.

He was not going out again, but he would have a smoke till Mr. Conway arrived, and he had brought some papers, if Joanna would care to look at them.

"Lord Meredyth," said Joanna, in a low voice, "will you please tell my father before he comes to me?"

And he, seeing no pleasant task before him, promised.

Whereupon she went upstairs to her old seat by the window, and waited for her father with an indifference which surprised her.

Downstairs Lord Meredyth was wondering to himself whether things would be easier for Joanna if he were to tell her all he knew about Nicholas Osborne and his unworthiness.

He felt that, in her place, contempt and disgust would have killed his love, but somehow he was not so sure about Joanna.

It was after four before she saw her father. She saw him come into the hotel, she heard his step and his voice in the passage without any particular feeling, but when the door opened and she saw his familiar, homelike face again, when the first desolation of utter loneliness among strangers was at an end, Joanna suddenly burst into sobs.

"Oh, father, I can't bear it—I can't bear it!" she said. "My heart is breaking!"

But it was not to comfort she awoke, it was to a first realisation of the trouble that had come to her.

"My poor child, my poor child," was all Mr. Conway said.

"Father, I wish he had died—now he will *never* be my own again. Nothing can bring it right—nothing, nothing, nothing!"

Her words came with long, shivering sighs, and a despairing agitation which alarmed her father, but presently she grew calmer, and he tried to bring her pride to her aid.

"My darling, he is a scoundrel——" he began, but Joanna let him get no further.

"It is not true," she said, "and if anybody tells you that, you must not believe it. It is my only comfort—the only thing I have got left—to think that he is good, and that he did love me. You don't know him, you know you don't know him as I do!"

"No, dear, no, my pet, you are quite right," said Mr. Conway hastily and meekly.

"I shall never talk to you like this again, father," said Joanna. "I am going to be brave, and I shall get over it—people always do. But, please, will you tell them all at home, and say they are not to speak to me about it, but just be as if nothing had happened?"

"It shall be as you like," Mr. Conway said. "Even if you would rather not go home to-morrow?"

"It must be done," said Joanna, "and every day will only make it harder. I should like to go at once, this very minute."

"But we can't go to-night; we could only get as far as Coleraine."

"I know, I know," Joanna said. "I don't want to be unreasonable. Let us go down to the boat to see Lord Meredyth off, and then to the theatre. Shall we go to the theatre and amuse ourselves?" she ended excitedly.

They did not go to the theatre, but Joanna's quietude was over, and Meredyth was amazed at the change. She could not bear to be still for a moment; she did not want to be left alone; she was utterly different from the quiet, impassive girl he had left.

Joanna herself would have given worlds to regain that impassiveness and lack of feeling.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"'The summer,' she said, 'cometh blithe and bold;
And the crocus is lit for her welcoming;
And the days will have garments of purple and gold;
But I would be left by the pale green spring,
With the snowdrops somewhere under the mould;
For I dare not think what the summer may bring.'"

THE first few days at home went wonderfully well. Joanna was angry with herself because Cliff House seemed to her all at once small and poor, Ballylone people very dull, and their interests stupid and petty.

It was strange and hard to meet everybody again, but in the first bitterness of her grief she neither felt that, nor the return to the place where she had been so happy with Nicholas, so keenly as she would have done later on.

She was a good imitation of her old self, and unceasingly active. She could not bear to be still for a moment, and so contrived to get through the day well enough, and to put off going to bed and being alone as long as possible.

She took up her bees again, her lessons with Polly, and her carving ; she went to see the Clarkes, Mrs. McCracken, and the rest of the village, and was resolutely gay. Being duly warned, they said nothing to her, but they made up for it by saying a great deal to each other.

Sir Nicholas they spoke of with bated breath, and discussion of this thing that he had done, superseded all Church discussions, ended all quarrels. Joanna they argued about with more acrimony, some declaring her to be pitied, others asserting that she had never cared for Sir Nicholas, and had simply been attracted by his title.

Even Mr. Conway began to hope that things were not as bad as he feared at first, but his wife knew better. Joanna's very fearlessness and constant rebellions had made her a favourite with her stern, disagreeably virtuous mother, and the hurt and insult to her daughter came home to her very thoroughly.

Mr. Conway consoled himself by calling Nicholas every bad name he could think of, and throwing up his agency, which was not a very great sacrifice, as it had always given him more trouble than profit. Mrs. Conway meant to be kind, but worried Joanna more than anyone else.

Pity was the reverse of a comfort to her ; she liked much better to have Mrs. Morris say fretfully : " It was awful when you were away, Joanna, with no one but Polly to interpret between the mother and me." Or to have Polly put her arms round her neck and say it had been so lonely without Aunt Joanna, and that she hated to do all her lessons with grand-mamma.

But just at first Joanna bore everything with a smile.

On the first Sunday a reaction came. She had resolutely put away the memory of that day week, when she had gone for a ride over the moor with Nicholas and the rest, and had such a delightful return in the gloaming with him. She had taken her prayer-book and sat down to try and fix her attention on her collect and gospel, which had never taken her so long to learn. She brought them to her mother of her own accord before starting for church, and Mrs. Conway's heart ached as she stood before her, with that resolute smile on her face, waiting so indifferently till Polly had finished her

hymn—Joanna, who had always been so eager and so troublesomely impatient.

She stood there, as she had stood so many Sundays, ever since she could remember, ever since she had been a little thing, just able to learn the verse of a hymn, and Mrs. Conway's hard eyes filled with tears as she took the prayer-book from her.

Joanna frowned, tried to collect her attention, and began with a rush, but after the first sentence she stumbled.

"Then answered the Jews——" Joanna looked all round the room for inspiration. "Then answered the Jews——"

"And said unto Him——" Mrs. Conway suggested.

"Then answered the Jews and said unto Him——" repeated Joanna, and came to a dead stop.

"Never mind to-day," Mrs. Conway said. "It doesn't matter for once in a way."

Then Joanna broke out:

"Why don't you scold me?" she cried angrily. "I won't have you pity me!"

She snatched the prayer-book from her mother, flung it down on the floor and rushed out of the room.

"I thought that angelic frame of mind wouldn't last," said Mrs. Morris, secure in her immunity from reply.

In her own room Joanna was walking up and down.

"Why should I have been angry?" she thought to herself.

"What does it matter? What does anything matter?"

Why did everybody at home irritate her, and remind her. Should she ever be content to settle down here, and squabble over whose ducks were the best, and whether it was right or wrong to turn to the east in the Creed, or would she be always miserable and fighting against the pettiness of it?

She knew it would not always seem like years and years to be lived without Nicholas, and she did not even want him back; it could never be the same. But she was jealous, frightfully jealous.

If he were to come to her this very minute, and ask her to take him back, she should do it of course, but she should never be happy or trust him again, so it was best as it was, if only Lady Florence would make him happy.

Joanna flung herself down on her bed. In the distance she could hear the church bells beginning, and the others were assembling by the open hall door.

Mrs. Conway's voice came: "Miss Clarke says Mr. Jellett never touches an egg unless it is hard boiled, so if he comes up to supper this evening, Annie, you must not forget. Be sure you lock the kitchen door, and don't loiter about and come in during the prayers. Polly, that hole in your glove is disgraceful. You are old enough to have mended it yourself,

or, for that matter, your mother might have troubled herself."

Then Mrs. Morris: "Polly, tell your grandmother that I knew nothing about the hole till this minute."

Next came an enquiry as to whether Mr. Conway was going, and a shrill request from Polly for a penny to put into the plate.

After which their footsteps and voices gradually died away, and Joanna was left alone.

Was this the kind of life that was before her till she grew an old woman?

"I could bear it better if I had taken more trouble to have all the enjoyment possible out of it," she said to herself. "If I hadn't believed like a fool that it would go on forever, and that Nicholas was unchangeable."

And then she told herself that it was her fault for not being able to keep him, and made excuses for him, so utterly far-fetched that even he himself could scarcely have supported them! But she could not believe that a life begun as his was, could be happy, or could be for his good. And yet she could do nothing to help him—nothing to keep him straight and make him a good man. She had made for herself an idol, and it had been taken away from her, and she could do nothing now to keep it clean and unsoiled, only pray and hope.

There were his presents to be put together, a thing which had to be done, but which seemed to Joanna like cutting the last link between them.

She took them all out, looked at them, touched them with caressing fingers, and then resolutely packed them away.

There were the butterflies he had given her when he came back from Dublin, a diamond bangle which he had brought her for her birthday—various bangles and brooches which all marked eras and which had all to be packed up and placed in the box which was to hold them. Last of all there was the ring, over which he had sworn to be true to her again and again. Joanna shut up the case which held it with a very sore heart.

She loved them all—every one, and it seemed like parting with him over again. She did not send back his letters—they were only a few, which it would pain her to send and him to receive.

She tied them up, and placed them carefully away in her hat-box, which locked, and so would be safe from Mrs. Conway's inspection; then she corded and sealed her packet, taking a certain pained pleasure in its neatness, and directed it to "Sir Nicholas Osborne, Care of Messrs. Cox & Company," after which she felt that the worst was over. Surely nothing could ever be like that half hour's good-bye.

Nothing could have been more unwelcome to her just then than Miss Chester's voice and self-satisfied little person, as she made her way into the room, with the slightest pause for a knock, and kissed Joanna effusively.

"I have been longing to see you, Joanna," she cried. "I only came home last night, and as soon as I saw you were not going to church with the others, I made up my mind that I would not go either, but would come over to see you instead. Tell me all about Merevale, and how you got on there. No end of sport, I am sure. I met a man at the Garrison dance in Belfast, who said he knew the Meredyths, and that it was the rowdiest house he had ever stayed in."

Miss Chester brought it all out in a breath, and she was the first person who had ventured to mention Merevale to Joanna in anything but the most apologetic and hesitating manner. It was a relief to talk to somebody who was not in the least afraid of hurting her feelings; Merevale people and interests naturally filled her mind just now, and it was a relief to speak of them.

She looked at Miss Chester, and wondered how any admiration or envy of her had ever entered her head; she was fat, a trifle coarse, and she had rather a vulgar voice.

And yet it was not she who had changed, and Joanna wondered if she was becoming snobbish that the difference between the people at Merevale and the people at Ballylone struck her so keenly and disagreeably.

"I suppose you speak to nobody under a duke now," suggested Miss Chester, to her utter confusion. "I hear you are disengaged once more? Did you see anyone there you liked better—tell me all about it."

"I will talk of anything else you like," said Joanna steadily, and Miss Chester had sufficient sense to follow her lead.

She was a capital listener, drinking in all Joanna told her about the ways of Merevale, with sighs of envy. Miss Chester would have given much to be fast, had she known exactly how to set about it.

"And all this time," she said, "I have only had little Jellett, who follows me about like a dog, and is sat upon by the whole parish. He thinks the sun rises and sets on me," she added impressively, but Joanna had heard this too often about men who seemed to survive Miss Chester's recounted coyness very comfortably.

"You don't mean to say nobody fell in love with you the whole time you were there—with a houseful of men?" she said, with a distinct sense of superiority. She was quite certain that half masculine Merevale would have succumbed to her charms, had she had the opportunity which was denied to her, and wasted on Joanna.

"Nobody that I know of," said Joanna with a laugh. "Lady Hilda said——"

"There you are ! You can't open your mouth without mentioning a lord or a lady or an earl or a duke—or even a prince," said Miss Chester, immensely impressed. "How are you going to come back to Elizabeth's fads, and Mrs. O'Brien's rheumatism? Do you know, your *protégé* Richard O'Brien is drinking himself and his mother into the workhouse."

And then Miss Chester floated away to Ballylone gossip, to Miss Clarke's temper, and the way in which Elizabeth was fancying herself into hysteria. How she had taken into her head for one whole day that she could not eat, and for nearly a week that her voice had gone.

But talk of what she liked, she always came back, as if fascinated, to Merevale.

"Will they ask you to go there again, Joanna?" she said.

And Joanna said she didn't know, and thought to herself that nothing and nobody would ever persuade her to go there again.

"I think you are very much to be envied," said Miss Chester, with a long sigh.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"I stand by the river where both of us stood,
And there is but one shadow to darken the flood ;
And the path leading to it, where both used to pass,
Has the step but of one to take dew from the grass."

So life at Ballylone began again for Joanna.

Everything was the same—the episode which had brought Sir Nicholas into her life had ended, and left no outward trace, except a little sharpness and impatience in her manner.

Everything was the same. Mrs. Conway's new gentleness soon passed away, and Zenana meetings, Sunday-school, even the old question of stays, arose once more and worried as much as ever. Elizabeth was still fretful and fanciful, Polly constantly in trouble, and Mr. Conway engrossed in his farm, and spending as much time and money over it as he could possibly contrive to secure from his business.

Only Joanna was changed—even she herself hardly knew how much. Every day her trouble seemed to her to grow harder to bear, and there were times when she said to herself that she could not bear it—that she could not stand life any longer. But there was nothing else to be done, nothing but to make up her mind to go on again.

Everything reminded her of Nicholas, and of how, just a

year ago, he had asked her to be his wife, and she had grown from being flattered and excited to care with all her strength.

The show carnation, which she had ruthlessly sacrificed to him at their second meeting, was flowering again, and old Kelly sometimes came over to discuss with her the bees she had given Nicholas. There was another school feast in the meadow like the one to which he had come, turning depression into joy, and presently there was another hay-cock in the very spot where he had first told her he loved her.

She felt that in a new place things might not have been quite so hard to bear, but there was no money to be wasted in the Conway household, and Mrs. Conway would not be likely to excuse any discontent with her home on Joanna's part.

So she never complained, and threw herself into her carving as she had never done before. She made no change in her life, only the irrepressible happiness, the sheer joy of living had gone.

She looked after her bees as carefully as ever, but the excitement of a swarm could not make her forget everything in the world.

It was terribly, dreadfully dull at Ballylone. Joanna missed Nicholas, and she missed the constant excitement of her engagement, too.

Summer passed into autumn and autumn into winter, and still she never heard of him—never heard what had become of him more than if he had been dead, and sometimes the longing to know was very hard to fight down. She did not even know if he was married to Lady Florence or separated from her.

Lady Hilda wrote to her occasionally, characteristic letters, which Joanna was glad to get, but which always brought the pain back very freshly. She had gone through her London season, and then had come a trip to Norway in somebody's yacht, shooting in Scotland, and finally hunting once more, which, Lady Hilda declared, she considered the only thing worth living for. She said she would have liked, above all things, to have been able to ask Joanna to come to her, if she had had any settled home of her own to ask her to, and that she was almost tempted to marry for the purpose. As Joanna had declined Lord Dawley for herself, what would she think of him for her, Lady Hilda?

But though she was very friendly and even affectionate, she did not come over to Ballylone.

Lord Meredyth wrote once, a kindly letter, asking how Joanna's carving was progressing, but saying no word of Nicholas.

And so the months went on, till nearly a year had passed, and even Ballylone had long ago ceased to talk of Nicholas and Joanna, and her father and mother said and thought that

she had "got over it," while to Joanna every day seemed only to make things fresher and clearer and to add to the keenness of her pain.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

" 'Ye weep for those who weep,' she said—
 'Ah, fools! I bid you pass them by.
 Go weep for those whose hearts have bled
 What time their eyes were dry.
 Whom sadder can I say?' she said."

"HAVEN'T you got anything left but monkeys, Polly? There are six already on this side of the screen, and one must draw the line somewhere."

"There were more of that than of any other advertisement. There are some big pictures, and there is a little one of two fashion-plate boys trundling a hoop, but it isn't *very* well cut out, and another of Mr. Stanley making a speech, but I began to paint that when I was little."

"Perhaps we had better have the monkey, then—seven is a lucky number, and it just fits into this corner."

"And I don't suppose the people in the workhouse have ever seen a monkey, do you, Aunt Joanna?" Polly suggested consolingly.

They were in one of the attics which was used as a lumber room, and which Joanna often found convenient for odd purposes, and they were very busy indeed with a screen which was destined for the nearest workhouse, and which had latterly been filling up all the time Joanna could spare from her carving.

"Will it be ready for my birthday, Aunt Joanna, do you think?" said Polly anxiously, surveying their work with an admiration which her aunt could not entirely share.

"Let me see—say a week for those two sides, and then binding and varnishing—oh, yes, Polly, we'll manage it somehow, and if we have another wet day it will be quite easy."

"And if grandmamma says I am not to go?"

"Wait till she does say it, for I see no reason why she should," said Joanna wisely. "Where's the paste brush? You shall go, and choose the ward for the screen, too."

"I should like it to go in two places," said Polly; "in the ward for the little girls, and in the ward Mrs. O'Brien will be in if she goes. But I think, perhaps, as she hasn't gone yet, we might make her a little one for herself, with more grown-up things on it."

Joanna laughed. "We'll see about that when my ship

comes in," she said, giving the monkey a final dab with her brush. "There, Polly, will that do?"

"Oh, do let me stick him myself. He looks just as if he were going to jump on the poor little Pears' soap baby. Your ship will come in after the Derry Bazaar, won't it, Aunt Joanna?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Joanna with a sigh. "I don't know whether it will ever come in, Polly."

And then Polly gave a cry of dismay, disclosing that she had rubbed her monkey, not wisely, but too well, to the extent of removing one of its legs, and was inconsolable until the discovery of a gaily painted bunch of flowers, with which she proceeded artistically to conceal the deficiency.

"I think your carving is better than anybody else's," said Polly consolingly. "I hope it will be the rabbit one that is sold, and not the other, unless you get a great deal of money for it."

"If either of them are sold at all, I shall be delighted," said Joanna; "I shan't expect a great deal of money for them."

"Just think when we take grandpapa through the bazaar, and he looks at this and at that," said Polly. "And all at once he will say: 'What a lovely bit of carving! I wish I had money enough to buy it,' and you will say: 'I did it,' and he will say: 'Not really and truthfully?' and then, when you tell him it is truthful, he will say you can go to London and have lessons."

"I am afraid that is not very likely," said Joanna ruefully.

"And then you will go away in the train to London," Polly proceeded, "and will go to a master and say: 'I want to learn to carve; will you teach me?' and he will ask what you have done, and you will show him the knobby bit, and he will say: 'It is no good; you carve too well to be taught; but if you give me some things, I know a shop where I can sell them for hundreds of pounds'; and then——"

"Wait till we get so far, and then you can tell me the rest," Joanna interrupted; "and in the meantime, Polly, we must cut out a few more little things to fill up corners. There are some more *Lady's Pictorials* and *Graphics* on the window seat, and another pair of scissors somewhere about."

Polly jumped up obediently, bearing the ruthless shortening of her tale with equanimity.

"It is raining awfully, still," she said, from the window; "there is a little river running down one side of the avenue, and the trees look so wet."

"Bring me the papers, child; I am only going to work for half an hour more," said Joanna.

"I am just gathering them. But oh, Aunt Joanna, who do you think is coming up the avenue in all the rain?"

"I haven't an idea," said Joanna. "Be quick! It's too early for the postman. Someone with chickens to sell, perhaps?"

"It is the very last person you would expect," said Polly, and then Joanna suddenly sprang to her feet, with a mad, crazy idea in her head.

"She has got on that oldest green waterproof, and her dress is tucked up till it is as short as mine," supplemented Polly, and Joanna sat down again, and took up her scissors quietly.

After a moment she said :

"You can't mean Miss Clarke, Polly ; she would never come out a day like this."

"But I do. How uncomfortable she looks! My golly ! there goes her umbrella—inside out or I'm a Dutchman !"

"Polly, what did I say ? Next time I heard one of those extraordinary expressions, no more story-books for a fortnight."

"I am sorry ; it is only because it was so sudden it made me forget. Oh, come and look at her, Aunt Joanna! What will she do ?"

Whereupon Joanna yielded to curiosity and came to the window, too, and together they watched Miss Clarke by a valiant effort right her umbrella and struggle on to the house through the wind and rain.

"What in the world can have brought her up here on a day like this ?" said Joanna.

"She generally won't go out if it even dribbles," chimed in Polly, "and to-day even you and I are staying in."

"Well, let's restrain our curiosity and go on cutting out," said Joanna. "We'll hear all about it in good time, I am sure. Here's a picture of a girl gathering flowers, that will just do to cover that bare space, Polly, if you cut it out carefully."

Joanna had changed a little between the April afternoon, just two years ago, when she had escaped from a Zenana meeting to join Miss Chester in Ballylone, with the loss of her stays her deepest trouble, and this April afternoon when she sat in the lumber room trying to direct Polly's cutting-out.

Her soft wavy hair was as pretty as ever, and had more trouble bestowed upon it than in those days, and her brown eyes had somehow gained a very wistful look. She was no longer angular, no longer even so unbecomingly slight ; in fact she was waking up latterly to the fact that she had a good figure. Her manner had become more assured, and her spirits had ceased to be outwardly subject to such frequent ups and downs.

That year since her return to Ballylone had taught her a good many things, and one lesson she had found harder than all the rest—she had learned to wait. To wait from day to day, and week to week, and month to month, hoping against hope

to hear of or from Nicholas. To be filled with absurd expectation and bitterest disappointment twice every day at post-time, to be roused to excitement by every telegram or message, and all in silence and without a word to anyone. And hardest of all, she had to learn to sit still, to realise her utter powerlessness to raise a finger to help this man from going to destruction—this man who had been everything in the world to her one morning, and absolutely nothing when the night came.

She did not allow herself to realise how much Nicholas was to her still ; she was wilfully blind to the knowledge that if she was more careful about her dress and her hair now than she had been, it was all in some vague way for him ; if she worked hard, and sometimes hopefully, at her carving, it was with the thought that one day if she was ever known in the world, he might know.

Idleness had never been a failing of hers, and now she was busy from morning till night, and so was sometimes content ; but Joanna was very young still and she did not want to be content—she wanted to be happy.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

“’Tis long since thou and I have met,
And yet methinks it were unkind
Those moments to forget.”

“POLLY, it’s sold ! Take the letters quick, child, till I read what they say.”

Joanna bundled the rest of the post into Polly’s hands, and, though they were in the middle of Ballylone street, that faithful little sympathiser executed a war-dance of triumph.

“Which of them is sold, Aunt Joanna ? Is it the knobby one, or the little one with rabbits ?”

“It is the knobby one, as you call it. Fancy, Polly, even before the exhibition is opened ! I am to get three whole guineas and a half !”

“I am sorry it is that one,” said Polly ; “it took such a long time to do and it was so pretty. I think you ought to have got hundreds of pounds for it, Aunt Joanna.”

“You little goose—just think what a lot three guineas and a half can buy ! You shall choose something awfully nice when we go up to Derry,” said Joanna.

“I should like a little tea-cup best of anything,” said Polly at once ; “a little tea-cup that I could have my own tea in, different to anybody else. Aunt Joanna, Mrs. Moreland is

nodding to you from the window, and she looks so funny without her cap."

"What an odd thing to choose," said Joanna, "because you know your tea is all the same whatever kind of a cup it is in. Polly, who in the world is the man in knickerbockers? He looks like a gentleman, and what is more, I believe he is going to speak to us!"

And even as she spoke, a tall, red-haired, freckled young fellow hurried across the street to shake her hand in the very warmest possible manner.

"How do you do, Miss Conway," he said effusively; "I am awfully glad to see you again."

"How do you do," said Joanna less warmly.

"What a long time it is since we last met! Doesn't it seem an *age*?" said the unknown, pausing to shake hands with Polly.

"Time passes quickly," said Joanna, with commendable originality. She could not say that the time since their last meeting had seemed long to her, as she had not the vaguest idea when they had met before. She tried to remember all the men she had known at Merevale, in the faint possibility of one of them having dropped from the clouds. It was rather hard to tell a person who apparently met her with such gladness that she had not the remotest idea who he was.

"I have been in here, actually trying to shop!" he went on with a laugh. "I am in sore want of tobacco, but I can't get anything fit to smoke, so I must run up to Derry to-morrow. Can I come to see you some time?"

Who on earth was he? Joanna's blank look betrayed her.

"Positively I believe you don't know me!" he said reproachfully. "Well, this is humiliating and no mistake."

"I am very sorry," Joanna said, "and it is very odd. I know so few people——"

"If that is the style in which you generally apologise, Miss Conway, I strongly advise you to drop it," said the stranger, who fortunately seemed by no means offended. "Don't crush me any further, but try if you can't remember a cock-fight in the days of your youth."

"A cock-fight?" said Joanna, completely bewildered.

"This is worse than ever," said the stranger, shaking his head. "A cock-fight by the river brim, a simple cock-fight, was to you—while to me it has been a dream—a remembrance—a—a—you know the sort of thing?"

"I remember you, I remember you, Mr. Kelly!" Joanna exclaimed.

"And about time, too, after wounding all my tenderest susceptibilities," said Mr. Kelly, taking off his hat mockingly.

"You see I recognised you at once by your capacity for

talking nonsense," said Joanna lightly. "And I really *am* glad to see you."

"I suppose you never took sufficient interest in me to enquire if I had passed my examination," said Mr. Kelly reproachfully. "And it will be news to you that I am home on first leave from Egypt?"

"Well, we only met once, you see," said Joanna. "And anxious as I was to hear, people might have thought it odd——"

"Only met once! How can you look at me and say that? It is quite true we only *spoke* once, but haven't I seen you about three times a week in Ballylone, ever since you were a baby——"

"I am sorry to disagree with you, Mr. Kelly," said Joanna, laughing. "Polly, what do you want?"

"Only to say that if you can't get both the tea-cup and the screen for Mrs. O'Brien, I think I would rather you got the screen," said Polly, in a stage-whisper.

"Which reminds me I have got to see Mrs. O'Brien on our way home," said Joanna. "So I had better say good-bye, Mr. Kelly."

But Mr. Kelly, being very hard put to it to get rid of his time, and by no means shy, did not allow himself to be disposed of so easily.

"You are the most ungrateful, unfriendly girl I ever met," he said. "On meeting me you snub and repress me in every possible way, and now your one idea is to get rid of me as quickly as possible. I am particularly good at visiting old women. Speak for me, Polly."

"You can't go and see Mrs. O'Brien, for she is in bed," said Polly sedately.

"You'll see how easily she and I will live through that," said Mr. Kelly reassuringly.

"Come along, then," said Joanna, at which Polly was a little shocked.

But she found Mr. Kelly immensely amusing, and had sidled round to him and taken his hand before they reached O'Brien's, where the lady of the house was in bed in the kitchen, in an atmosphere of smoke which nearly choked the whole party, with nobody to attend to her but an occasional kindly neighbour, and a ne'er-do-well son who came in drunk every night.

But from this paradise not even a glowing account of Polly's projected screen could persuade her to move to the workhouse.

Mr. Kelly made himself most agreeable, and proved much better able to find subjects of conversation than Joanna, producing also an extremely welcome shilling, and altogether making himself a welcome guest.

Then he walked to the Cliff House with Joanna and Polly, interviewed Mrs. Conway without any alarm, (whereas his sisters shook in their shoes when she spoke to them), and finally departed, much to Polly's regret.

"Isn't he funny and nice?" she said to Joanna.

"Very well for once," said Joanna. "But a person who is always trying to be funny is rather tiresome after a little. Polly, we have never found out what Miss Clarke came up in the rain for yesterday, and I am sure there is a mystery."

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Well, be it so or be it son't, you must be a common scholar afore you can be an uncommon one."

THE three days before the Derry Exhibition were a long time passing, and caused much anxiety to Joanna and Polly.

At first Mrs. Conway could see no reason why Joanna should want to go, and when her resistance on the point was overcome without any very great difficulty, she took a stand on the objection that to take Polly was really a sheer waste of money. There would be her ticket to Derry, her entrance to the exhibition, and probably her tea there—it was utter nonsense for a child of her age.

Polly nearly made herself ill from excitement and disappointment and made matters worse by being exceedingly naughty, so that when Joanna made an appeal to Mr. Conway for her, she thought it almost hopeless. But to her surprise he said at once that if she wished it Polly should go, and she heard him say to her mother: "I am very glad to see Joanna take so much interest in Polly and her carving, especially just at present."

Joanna puzzled over this speech till Polly's delight in her permission to go made her forget it.

"I do so want to see the knobby one once again," she said; "I want to see how they both look among other people's things, and to hear what grandpapa says when you turn round to him and say: 'This is done by me.'"

But all was very far from being right yet. The very morning of the exhibition Mr. Conway met Joanna and Polly on their way to get ready and said: "I thought I wasn't very keen about the exhibition, Joanna, so I asked Mrs. Chester if she would look after you and Polly."

"Oh, father!" said Joanna blankly, "aren't you coming?"

"It's not much in my line," said Mr. Conway, "and besides I have some business in Derry."

"Oh, make him come !" said Polly, pulling at Joanna's dress.

"I should—particularly—like you to come, father," said Joanna.

Mr. Conway could be good-natured enough when his good nature did not entail an afternoon's boredom, but he had no intention of allowing it to carry him so far, and Joanna soon found it was no use. Her projected surprise could not be carried out.

"Father," she said, "the reason I want you to go is this : I sent up some of my carving, and I want you to see what you think of it among the carving of other people."

"You sent up carving! Well, upon my word, you are a conceited little monkey !" said Mr. Conway, beginning to laugh, while Joanna grew a brilliant crimson.

"She is not conceited," broke in Polly indignantly; "it is lovely, and everybody thinks so."

"It is all very well for you to amuse yourself, Joanna, but it is absurd for you to send your work in among that of people who have had plenty of lessons," said Mr. Conway, laughing.

"It has been bought," said Polly, in defence of Joanna's flaming cheeks.

"Yes, father, I got three guineas and a half for one bit," said Joanna, and Mr. Conway was truly and unflatteringly astonished.

"I hope it is not from somebody who has given the money out of kindness," he said. "Nothing would annoy me more. Joanna, you ought to consult somebody before you do such mad things."

At which Joanna held Polly's hand tight and said nothing.

They dressed in depressed silence. Joanna's inner consciousness, which told her that, little as her work satisfied her, there was something in it, had not for the time been able to withstand Mr. Conway's unflattering amazement. She felt that she had indeed been conceited and ridiculous.

But the remembrance of that substantial three guineas and a half, which proved that somebody had not thought her ridiculous, was a comfort, and she presently ran downstairs with Polly, and bade a hasty good-bye to her mother with a lighter heart.

It gave her rather a start to be called back from the hall door, and for a moment she was afraid that Mr. Conway had told everything, and that her mother was going to interfere and keep her at home ; but Mrs. Conway only said : "Joanna, when shall I succeed in teaching you to shut the door after you? You are worse than your father." She bore the reproof with equanimity, shut the door with much meekness, and they were off.

Till the very last minute she did not know whether her father was coming to the exhibition or not, and now she would not have asked him for worlds, but just before they met the Chesters in Shipquay Street he turned to her with a smile, and said : " Well, Joanna, I suppose I must go and see this wonderful carving."

There were plenty of things to be seen before they got to the carving, and Joanna would not have seemed in a hurry for the world, though she could not take the same interest in silks and laces as she would have done at another time.

Fortunately for her, Mr. Conway did not take any interest in them at all.

At last. There was " the knobby one," a mirror frame carved with acorns and oak leaves, which had been Polly's favourite, and which Joanna herself had thought good. But how insignificant it looked now among all the rest, and close—so unfortunately close to a mantel-shelf by her admiration, Grinling Gibbons.

Never before had she been so glaringly aware of its defects ; she felt that she had indeed been conceited and absurd, that those three and a half guineas were ridiculous over-payment, and ought to be returned.

But the effect on Mr. Conway was precisely the opposite. Knowing nothing about carving, Joanna's struck him as being quite as good as any of the rest, just at the moment when she was realising what a vast gulf lay between her and success.

" Upon my word, Joanna, it is wonderfully good—remarkably good !" he said.

" Oh, father, but look what they have put it near—look at that mantel-shelf, it makes me feel so—infinitesimal !" said Joanna.

" Well, for my part, I think yours is every bit as good, and I really think I am unprejudiced," said Mr. Conway.

" Oh, can't you see the difference—can't you see the *awful* difference ?" said Joanna.

" It may be a little more—finished," said Mr. Conway, at which Joanna laughed quietly to herself, knowing that the greatest fault in her work was that it was finished too much.

But she laughed no longer, when her father in his satisfaction passed on his information to the Chesters, and from them to young Kelly, who had strolled up with them.

She was annoyed, till their persistent admiration of her work, as compared with that of Grinling Gibbons, made her laugh. Joanna herself knew very well what a wide difference lay between them.

She stood a little apart from her own work and admired, and wondered if she would ever have money enough to buy a

Grinling Gibbons, and dreamed of a house with an over-mantel like the one in Merevale billiard room.

"It is intense modesty that prevents you from admiring your own work?" said Marcus Kelly.

"It is merely common sense," said Joanna.

"Which is rather hard on the rest of us."

"Oh, I know a good deal of what you say is kindness," said Joanna. "No, I am not fishing for compliments. I would give anything in the world—I would give years of my life, to be able to carve like that."

Mr. Conway went away after a time and Joanna and Polly and the Chesters had tea together, under the auspices of Mr. Kelly and a couple of other men whom Miss Chester had managed to pick up.

Mr. Kelly sat next to Joanna, but he did not find her very conversational, and, being averse to silence, was obliged to console himself with a kind of chaffing flirtation with Miss Chester.

In the middle of which appeared the small form of Mr. Jellett, behind a huge bunch of roses that he was bearing to his admiration.

Whereupon Marcus Kelly, for sheer perversity, deserted Miss Conway and betook himself to Miss Chester's side, to carry on a very respectable amount of half-whispered conversation.

"Don't make me jealous," he said. "You don't want those flowers, I am sure, and for that matter they are half-withered."

"It would be a long time before you gave me any flowers, withered or otherwise, Mr. Kelly," rejoined Miss Chester.

"Well, just wait till next time I am in Ballylone," said Mr. Kelly.

Polly listened with all her ears, and the deepest interest, but Joanna's thoughts were far away.

She proved it by a completely irrelevant answer, for which Mr. Kelly reproached her later on.

"Miss Conway," he said, "why don't you like me? I am really quite a likeable sort of person."

"Like you?" said Joanna, who was not thinking about him at all; "I am sure I like you—why shouldn't I?"

"Well, the only day you were ever decently civil to me was on the cock-fight afternoon, and then the next thing you did was to crush all my aspirations by refusing to come to our dance."

"Well, I didn't do that with a good will," said Joanna, laughing; "I begged to go—I absolutely cried to go!"

"Come, now, that's better," said Mr. Kelly cheerfully, "and by the time I have come over and seen all your carvings we shall be the best of friends. You are going to agree to that, I

know, when you think how dull I am. Not one single solitary person to speak to near us, except about three."

"There's no doubt about it, you are a real true Irishman," said Joanna.

And then they went on a tour of inspection round the rooms, chaperoned by Polly, and became very friendly and merry.

But something better than the three guineas and a half came to Joanna as the result of that day's expedition. As she and Polly walked up to Cliff House with Mr. Conway, he said: "After this, Joanna, I suppose you consider yourself beyond lessons?"

"Oh, father!" said she breathlessly.

"Because if you don't, I see no reason why I could not arrange for you to go, say once a week, into Derry, if I can get hold of anybody who teaches carving."

"Oh, father," said Joanna rapturously, "I should be grateful to you forever! If you can afford it, I can tell you of people who teach there."

"So you don't consider you know too much to require instruction?" said Mr. Conway.

"It is what I have been longing for ever since I left school," returned Joanna.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"If ye loved only what were worth your love,
Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you."

"WHAT in the world is this latest fad that I hear, Elizabeth? Mrs. Conway says that you have taken it into your head to decline to come downstairs for the last few days?"

Miss Chester, with the freedom of old acquaintance, had made her way to Mrs. Morris' room unannounced, which was not a very frequent proceeding on her part. She and Elizabeth had played together when they were children, but now she very much preferred Joanna as a companion, and by dint of persuading herself that they were on a level had come to believe it.

Miss Chester was nine-and-twenty, and looked young for her age—she would have looked much younger had she not insisted on adopting the dress and manners of a girl of seventeen.

But the amusing ignorance and charming simplicity which had been delightful twelve years ago, were hardly so much appreciated now, and she was beginning to find it required an effort to retain the admirers without whom life to her was not

worth living. Consequently year by year she grew a little less particular, as year by year she grew a little fatter and coarser.

In the days when Elizabeth had thought it the most delightful thing that could happen to escape from her mother's surveillance to Miss Chester's championship, young men had run after Miss Chester, but now it was she who ran after young men.

This afternoon Elizabeth was by no means overjoyed to see her visitor, and did not attempt to pretend that she was.

"It is all very well for you who don't know what it is to feel ill to talk of fads," she said, in a lachrymose voice. "As for me, I scarcely know what a day without a headache is like."

"If you would get up, and go about and amuse yourself, you would feel twice as well," said Miss Chester trenchantly.

"You are like the rest—you don't understand. I have no more power to move off this sofa than a baby, let Dr. Moreland and Joanna say what they like. It is not likely that I would stay here from choice."

"There's nothing but hysteria the matter with you," said Miss Chester unsympathetically. "One day you take it into your head that you can't speak, another that you can't eat, and now that you have got a chill in your legs. Look here, let me put you on your feet and see what happens."

At which kind offer Elizabeth screamed.

"Oh, don't excite yourself; you are a goodly weight, and I have no overwhelming desire to exert myself," said Miss Chester. "I only came up because I was alone with Mrs. Conway, and I felt an irresistible inclination to say something shocking coming over me. Look here! does Joanna know this about Sir Nicholas? I haven't liked to speak to her about it, and her head seems full of nothing but carving."

"She knows there is some mystery about, but I don't think she knows what it is," said Elizabeth. "I suppose you know that Miss Clarke posted up here to tell us the very first minute she heard of it?"

"I have no doubt she was in ecstasies at having such a splendid piece of news," said Miss Chester; "but isn't somebody going to tell Joanna? It will be rather hard luck if it is sprung upon her."

"So I think, and there is the chance of her hearing any day—not that I suppose she cares."

"Did she ever care for him, or was it just the case of a title?" said Miss Chester. But Elizabeth did not know.

"She never speaks of him," she said, "so I suppose she has got over it. If she would only believe me, she is lucky. A man is everything charming, and you marry him, and all

goes well for a bit till children come and you lose your looks, and he goes out and amuses himself somewhere else. And if a woman tries to amuse herself everybody is up in arms—no, she is to stay at home and mind the baby.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Miss Chester meditatively; “I always tease the men immensely when they ask me to marry them; but perhaps some day, if somebody was particularly charming——”

“Mr. Jellett, for instance?”

“Oh, no,” said Miss Chester, with a delighted laugh. “Poor little man, I am very sorry for him, and he is so devoted! But he is not my ideal——”

“I am very sorry, Edith, but I really am not equal to talking any more,” said Mrs. Morris, seeing an account of the numerous pangs and heart-burnings caused by Miss Chester looming before her.

But when that animated and rotund young woman had taken her departure, Elizabeth bestowed a short period of reflection upon Joanna, instead of upon her own ills and misfortunes.

If there was anybody in the world besides herself that Mrs. Morris cared about, it was her sister. Polly suffered in her mind from her rather ignoble and very rancorous hatred of Polly’s father, and, besides, the little girl had not unnaturally grown to prefer the aunt who taught her, played with her, and, still better, loved her, to the mother who largely ignored her. This had aroused her mother’s rather unjust resentment, which was kept up by bitter jealousy.

But Mrs. Morris was not angry with Joanna, which was also unjust.

She was not even angry when that young woman came to enquire with some indignation if Elizabeth was going down to supper.

Joanna was not absolutely certain whether Mrs. Morris deserved pity or a good shaking, and was rather inclined towards the shaking. She had not much sympathy with people who lay on sofas and read novels all day long—she who had been working even harder than usual with her carving, with the encouragement of her first Derry lesson.

Her head was full of dreams and projects, interrupted for a few unwelcome minutes by supper, which was a rapid meal at Cliff House.

“Joanna, one minute,” said Elizabeth; “there is something I want to tell you. I daresay it will annoy you, but don’t get excited, for goodness’ sake; my head is aching.”

“Is it about my carving? Does father not mean me to have any more lessons?” said Joanna.

“Oh, *do* try to modulate your voice,” said Elizabeth fret-

fully. "It has nothing to do with your carving; it is about Sir Nicholas Osborne."

Joanna turned very white; nobody spoke to her of Sir Nicholas, and his familiar name sounded very strangely after this long silence.

Her voice was low enough when she spoke.

"Nicholas?" she said; "tell me."

"He is coming to the Lodge next week. Don't look at me like that, or I shall think the others were right to keep it from you as long as possible."

Joanna sat down abruptly, with the colour creeping slowly into her cheeks again, and there was a silence.

Her calmness, her interest in her carving—it was all gone in one minute, lost in a mad unreasonable excitement—was it joy or pain?

"Not alone?" she said.

"Not alone," repeated Elizabeth.

"Then I don't believe it!" said Joanna; "it is not true—he would not be so cruel."

"He is a scoundrel enough for anything——" began Elizabeth.

"I won't hear it! How dare you say it? It is not true, and if it were, it would be because he could not help it."

Mrs. Morris' fingers had gone to her ears. "Oh, Joanna, can't you think of anybody but yourself?" she said plaintively; "you are causing me absolute agony, and if you had only waited and let me finish what I was going to say, it would have been all right, for in this case I do believe it is the want of money."

"I will never hear you speak of him like that," said Joanna proudly.

"But you are not going to persuade me that you are such a fool as to care for a man who has treated you so abominably, and whose very name you haven't heard for a year?"

"Not care for him?" said Joanna passionately. "Do you think I don't care for him because I don't speak? Do you think that because I don't wear his ring on my finger I have forgotten all that I promised him when he gave it to me?"

"Oh, my dear child, do take things more quietly," Mrs. Morris pleaded. "If you haven't forgotten, the sooner you do forget the better. Follow his example."

"He has not forgotten. And if he had a thousand times over, I never shall. I suppose you think that because I laugh and talk I don't care any longer. Don't you know that everything reminds me of him—that sometimes, when I am trying to be merry and feel like other people, suddenly something comes into my head, and I go nearly mad. Do you know that sometimes I go up to my room, and repeat his name

over and over again out loud, just because I can't bear ever to hear it?"

The hot, passionate words came to Elizabeth as a revelation. She had never heard her sister mention Nicholas' name since her return from Merevale.

"You are very forgiving, I must say," she remarked with a sneer.

But, though her face grew crimson at her sister's tone, Joanna said nothing more. Elizabeth could not understand—she had never understood, and Joanna, remembering her own happiness two years ago, was sorry for her sister.

She had forgotten about Elizabeth's legs, she had forgotten about supper, she had even forgotten about her carving lessons, as she went to her own room and shut herself in with her excitement.

She was glad—glad in a way which was not far removed from pain, but which still was gladness unmistakable. And she was a wicked girl to be glad. What right had she to be so excited that she scarcely knew what she was doing, to tremble so that she could not stand, and to feel as if her whole tranquil world had been turned upside down in the last five minutes? None whatever; she was nothing to him, and he must be nothing to her.

If he came to Ballylone she must make it her business to avoid meeting him, and if she did meet him it must be as a stranger.

It would seem so natural for him to come and take her in his arms and kiss her, and yet it would be as wrong to be kissed by him now as to be kissed by—young Kelly. He was no more to her than that. It seemed so impossible.

"Oh, how shall I bear to see them together?" Joanna thought to herself; "how can I trust myself when he is there? I wish, I wish, I wish, I could go away—anywhere!"

"Aunt Joanna, aren't you coming down to supper? We have nearly finished, and the pancakes you wanted specially are cold."

What an age seemed to have passed since she had last heard Polly's shrill little voice, and had been annoyed at having to leave her carving!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"It appears to me that since I have been sitting here I have heard a great deal of vain and unprofitable conversation."

"I WANT half a pound of your best butter, and a dozen eggs," said old Kelly grumpily. "And it's the last time I will be doing Mrs. Carroll's errands."

"She be to be very busy now," Mrs. McCracken said, with her usual inclination to smooth matters over. "It is true, isn't it, that Sir Nicholas Osborne is going to bring his lady home?"

"And a nice one she will be," said old Kelly, seating himself on the edge of the herring-barrel, "leaving her own wedded husband to go off with the like of him——"

"You might keep a civil tongue in your head about your own master," remonstrated Mrs. McCracken. "It is I that can't forgive him for the way he treated Miss Joanna. But there is no being up to the ways of the quality; they are not just like other folk."

"I am not of your way of thinking there, Mrs. McCracken," said old Kelly, who was known never to agree with anybody. "Folk is very like each other, be they what they may. Do you mind Andy Devlin, him who used to live out by Laverty's mill? Likely you have heard tell of him, anyway. Well, he was going to be married on Rachel Sampson—not Mary, you'll mind, though it was her he took in the end——"

"Yes, I mind all about it," said Mrs. McCracken, with a vain effort to stop the recital. But old Kelly only settled himself more firmly on the herring-barrel, while the ends of his coat found a savoury resting-place among the herrings.

"Well, Rachel, she was that set up, she was near crazy, for she was a poor puny little woman, and she had never thought to get a man of her own. And one day says she to him: 'Andy, I wish you would go over to the train to meet my sister,' and says he, 'I'll go and welcome,' and when he come, there was Mary Sampson, and a right sonsy girl she was, not like her sister."

"I mind Rachel very well," said Mrs. McCracken; "she went to the school with my mother."

"It's Mary I'm telling you about," said old Kelly, clearing his throat, which resulted in a very narrow escape for the pile of carpeting. "When he come to her, says she: 'So I hear you are to be married on Rachel, Andy?' and he says, 'Aye,' and says she: 'I am wondering why you never asked myself, Andy,' says she, and says he, 'Sure, I thought you wouldn't

have me.' 'Did you, indeed?' said she. 'You might have given me the chance.' Then says he, all in a minute: 'I'll give it you now; will you have me?' and she says: 'That I will with a light heart'; and come that day four weeks they were married. It's truth I'm telling you."

"And there's Rachel, buried them both, and a lone woman to this day," said Mrs. McCracken, who had heard the moving tale many times before, and did not consider it very appropriate; "but that wasn't like a married woman."

"I could tell you a wheen of stories about that," said old Kelly, shaking his head. "I mind, when I was young myself, I used to go up to Tamlaght every eight days, for a whiles courting with Jennie McBride that's married on big McDermott now. And then a neighbour would come in for a crack with her father, and sure enough——"

"And will it be to-morrow you expect Sir Nicholas and the lady?" broke in Mrs. McCracken. She had heard the story of Jeunie McBride's sister so many times.

"Not to Monday it isn't, but Jamie and Mrs. Carroll are nearly out of their mind getting ready this two days. She is looking for a girl to help in the house. I suppose you wouldn't be thinking of putting out your Maggie?"

"Not in that house, as long as I have hands to work," said Mrs. McCracken, and in some degree she spoke the sentiments of the village.

There was a great commotion in Ballylone, and but one subject of conversation for the time being, whether the people who talked were in Mrs. McCracken's shop or Miss Clarke's drawing-room. Only before Joanna was there silence, a conscious silence which was almost worse to her than speech.

Mrs. Conway and Miss Clarke forgot their last quarrel over Jane Bruce to whisper of this shocking thing, and what they intended to do and to leave undone.

There was a certain amount of gratification in feeling that they had every intention of ignoring an earl's daughter, and that they, in the consciousness of their virtue, could look down upon her from a height of superiority.

There was a satisfaction in determining beforehand to repel the advances of a Lady Florence and to humble her. Miss Clarke glowed with virtuous horror at the thought of the new-comer; she must preserve her virgin modesty from all soiling contact with this contaminating and unprincipled woman, whose very name was only to be pronounced in a shocked whisper, and who would doubtless be exceedingly anxious to make her way back to respectability under Miss Clarke's wing.

Mrs. Conway added a special clause, decently veiled, to morning prayers: "May we be delivered from those who are

hardened in sin, and will not turn aside from it, O Lord, and if it be possible, may they be brought into the right path."

In which she considerably recognised the difficulties of the case, and that she was possibly setting the Lord too hard a task.

She also spoke to Mr. Jellett, representing to him the duties which lay before him with regard to Lady Florence, and filling the meek little man with apprehension at the idea of a remonstrance being called upon from him.

For everybody at Ballylone, except Joanna, knew that Sir Nicholas and Lady Florence were not married—that Lady Florence had never even been divorced.

And there was a baby—a baby which Mrs. Conway was not at all sure that Mr. Jellett should not refuse to christen if he was called upon to do so, because it had certainly no right whatever to exist.

Mrs. Conway expressed her opinion to everybody, beginning with Mr. Jellett and ending with Mrs. Carroll, whom she walked up to see the Sunday before Sir Nicholas' arrival, as a duty of necessity.

Mrs. Carroll was very busy, Sunday though it was, and not at all in the mood for visitors.

"I am sorry to see you do not use Sunday as a day of rest, Mrs. Carroll," Mrs. Conway said.

"This is a bi-ordinary occasion, ma'am. I want the house to look as decent as may be, and the time is short."

"So you forget your duties to your God in preparing for such as the woman who is coming here?" said Mrs. Conway sternly.

"I hope I don't forget my duties to nobody," said Mrs. Carroll, half offended; but she was a good-natured, cheery young woman, and she said, "Such as she be, she'll want a bed to lie on, ma'am, and I have had to put together some things in a room that has never been used yet, to make a nursery."

"And you are content to let that child of sin come in to contaminate your children——"

"Bless you, ma'am, the little one is only two months old," said Mrs. Carroll cheerfully, and for the moment Mrs. Conway was silenced.

The example of a baby two months old certainly could not be very injurious to Mrs. Carroll's sturdy children.

"If it is not the child, there is the mother," said Mrs. Conway solemnly. "We pray 'Lead us not into temptation,' Mrs. Carroll."

"That is all very true, ma'am, but I can hardly make my husband throw up a good place, and I would be sorry not to do my best by Sir Nicholas. He is a civil-spoken, kindly gentleman."

"Go your own way, then. I can say no more, and I can only hope, as I do, that no harm will come from it," said Mrs. Conway sourly. "If you care nothing for your children——"

"Bless their hearts, the eldest isn't but coming on ten, and what would she know about it?" said Mrs. Carroll.

With which she proceeded to set down some more brass nails in the carpet, and Mrs. Conway departed, that her eyes might not be desecrated by Sunday labour.

Mrs. Carroll was good-natured and willing enough, and ready to oblige Sir Nicholas as well as unwilling to quarrel with her bread and butter.

With a girl under her she worked hard in the way of preparation, and took no little trouble about it.

She had everything as far ready as she could by Monday, with fires in the rooms, freshly draped dressing-tables which had given her some trouble, and flowers, begged from old Kelly, all about the house.

She had laid out a plentiful tea in the dining-room, with buttered eggs and bacon, for the mysteries of afternoon tea were still a sealed book to her, and had banished the children and donned her Sunday dress by the time she heard the dog-cart wheels in the avenue.

As far as she was concerned, Sir Nicholas should have a welcome.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"Meanwhile, I was thinking of my first love,
As I had not been thinking of aught for years,
Till over my eyes there began to move
Something that felt like tears.
And I swear, as I thought of her thus, in that hour,
And of how, after all, old things were best,
That I smelt the smell of that jasmine flower
Which she used to wear on her breast."

"UNDOUBTEDLY this is the last place God ever made, and it must have been done late on the sixth day, for He clearly hasn't had time to finish it," said Lady Florence disgustedly.

She had established herself as comfortably as she could in the corner of the railway carriage, but on the Ballylone line even first-class carriages left much to be desired.

Lady Florence was bored by her journey, and horrified by the increasingly countrified appearance of each station they passed.

"Nicholas, will you trouble yourself to answer me?" she said; "you must have read those papers down to the last advertisement."

"I didn't know your last speech required an answer," said

Nicholas, with a yawn. "I have no information as to what period of the creation was given to Ballylone."

Upon which he returned to his paper. The last year had changed him a little; he had grown slightly stouter, as the result of good living and little exercise on the Continent, and there were lines about his eyes, which had no business there for many a year; but he was as careful about his clothes and the curl of his moustache as ever, and he had not forgotten his swagger.

"The only thing to be done will be to fill the house with people," said Lady Florence.

"Where's the money to come from?" said Nicholas.

"Don't be absurd. Do you imagine that you and I can settle down to pass the rest of our lives *tête-à-tête*?"

"Heaven forfend! But you'll soon find out you can't have people down," said Nicholas, shrugging his shoulders, after a fashion that he had picked up from Lady Florence.

"As far as I can see, it will be worse than Northumberland," returned Lady Florence fretfully. "You are the most selfish man I ever met. If you had thought of me a little and not wasted your money on gaming tables and women——"

"Oh, for goodness sake, drop it!" said Sir Nicholas impatiently; "you have thrown that in my teeth often enough. And as to extravagance, I wonder which of us has the most to complain of as regards that. Here we are. If you will stay here for a moment I will send Williams to you, and go and look after the nurse and baby myself."

"Why, Nicholas, your hand is positively shaking!" said Lady Florence, in surprise.

Nicholas moved hastily away, flushing all over his fair, good-looking face. It was more than a year ago now since he had left that bare little station behind him, with Joanna's hand tightly held in his under their rug, and Joanna's brown eyes, bright with excitement and delight, looking up into his face.

He thought of it as he looked after the nurse and the luggage, and rejoined Lady Florence, who was waiting for him on the station steps in a state of intense dissatisfaction.

Carroll was there, too, with the dog-cart, and Nicholas said good-evening to him, and went to have a glance at Benedict and to pat his neck before he turned to Lady Florence.

"Are you ready?" he said. "What's the matter?"

"I should like to know how you expect us all to go in that?" said Lady Florence severely; "for one thing, you know that I hate those high carts, and that man says there is nothing else here."

"Nor at home, neither," said Carroll sullenly. He was not accustomed to be spoken of as "that man," and treated as a nonentity.

"I wouldn't take the baby up there, sir," put in the nurse.

But Sir Nicholas' good temper was not as proof against annoyance as usual to-day.

"You can take your choice between going in the dog-cart and walking," he said, "for there's no third way. If you like, I can take you all, and Carroll will walk ; if you don't like that, say so."

Which speech had a decided effect, and after a murmur about her luggage from Lady Florence, everybody yielded, and the baby, the nurse, and Williams somehow managed to establish themselves on the back seat.

Nicholas was very silent as they drove along the old familiar road. He knew every turn of it so well : Bruce had had his gate repainted, the gate on which he and Joanna had swung Polly one summer afternoon, till it suddenly dismayed them by coming off its hinges, and Kennedy had filled up the gap in his hedge through which they had escaped from Miss Chester in the first days of their engagement.

And then they came to the lodge gates, and there were the little trees, not grown much taller, which was lucky for them, as otherwise their last day would have come before now. There was the avenue, sorely in need of gravelling, and there was the square little house at the end. Nicholas remembered with anxiety what a glorified description he had always given of this abode, after his fashion of making rather more than the best of the things that belonged to him. He had represented it as a shooting lodge—a little rough, certainly, but quite possible, and he knew Lady Florence's ideas of shooting lodges well enough, and wondered what she would say—wondered, characteristically, what Williams would say, too.

Mrs. Carroll came to the door to receive them, capless, pink-gowned, but for once without a baby in her arms, in deference to the proprieties.

She liked Sir Nicholas, who had always been polite and considerate to her, who had not objected to her innumerable children, and had generally had a kind word and a sixpence for them whenever they came across him.

"You are kindly welcome, sir," she said, "and I have done the best I could to have things right for you."

"Nick !" said Lady Florence tragically, "don't tell me that you have brought me to live here, and to have that woman to attend on me ?"

"Mrs. Carroll, can one of the children take the horse ? you see, I had not room for your husband," said Nicholas. "Florence, I don't see that you will gain anything by remaining up there, unless you prefer to get out in the yard."

"I should prefer not to get out at all," said Lady Florence.

"Just as you please," said he calmly.

Upon which she consented to allow herself to be helped gingerly down, and even to enter the house.

The hall was about four feet square, with the drawing-room on one side, the dining-room on the other, and the stairs and a short passage leading to the kitchen directly opposite. There was barely room for Lady Florence, the servants, baby, and rug-straps, not to speak of Sir Nicholas.

"Will you come into the dining-room, ma'am?" Mrs. Carroll suggested. "I have a cup of tea ready for you."

"Oh, thank you," said Sir Nicholas. "Florence, you will be the better of some tea."

But Lady Florence was beyond conciliation.

Nicholas was rather nervous. Never before had the house looked to him so small, so shabby, so beneath the contempt of Lady Florence, emphasised by that of the two English maids. And then the high-tea arrangements in the dining-room—the white cloth, the loaf ready for cutting, the breakfast cups, the buttered eggs.

Lady Florence took the one step necessary to enter the room, and then sat down abruptly in the first chair; the baby in the hall set up its weak little wail, being both cold and hungry, and Williams and the nurse looked equally ready to melt into tears.

Sir Nicholas still struggled for peace.

"Come, Florence," he said, "I can see you are worn out. Shall we ask Mrs. Carroll to make you some tea? I know of old her tea is always good."

"I am not prepared to drink a breakfast cup of tea at this hour of the day," said Lady Florence sharply, "and the smell of that bacon makes me ill. Take it away, you woman, whatever your name is, and bring me something a little less savage to my bedroom."

"Don't take this away, please, Mrs. Carroll," interposed Sir Nicholas. "I, at least, am very hungry, and I see you have remembered my weakness for buttered eggs. Florence, I am sure nurse and Williams are hungry, and doesn't that kid want to be fed?"

"I am going to my room," said Lady Florence; "I should like to know when my luggage comes, and we might have dinner about eight, I suppose, if anything can be got to eat."

"People frequently eat at Ballylone," said Sir Nicholas drily. "Mrs. Carroll, will you show Lady Florence up to her room? And, Williams," with an abject attempt at conciliation, "you and nurse had better have something to eat here for to-day."

"I hope I know my place better than that, sir," said Williams with withering disapproval. "I am sure I am not

particular, and if some of the maids would show me to the upper servants' dining-hall, for once——"

"Will I take you up-stairs, ma'am?" said Mrs. Carroll, in a voice which had all at once grown hard and sullen.

"Are you chambermaid, butler, and footman all in one, my good woman?" said Lady Florence.

"Whatever I be, I am not accustomed to being evened to a savage," said Mrs. Carroll.

Sir Nicholas fled incontinently—fled out of the house, as there was no place of refuge inside it—and betook himself first to the yard to pay a visit to Benedict and the Witch, and then, in default of anywhere else to go, to the garden, where he smoked a pipe in the dusk, near the beehive which Joanna had given him.

He hoped it would all come right; that Williams, Mrs. Carroll, and Lady Florence would somehow settle down peacefully; but till they did, he preferred to be out of the way.

A year had made a good deal of difference between Lady Florence and him. The feeling which they had had for each other, and which they had politely called love, had not died all at once—was not even acknowledged to be dead—but had undoubtedly suffered a good deal. When two exceedingly selfish people live entirely together for a year, with no foundation of mutual respect or mutual tastes, there are likely to be a good many rubs and disagreements.

Till Nicholas' winnings began to melt away all went well, but that was not long in happening, and then they mutually grumbled at each other's expenditure, and Lady Florence accused Nicholas of dragging her down to poverty, while he said nothing, but thought a great deal.

Their society was of the most shady description; even on the Continent Lady Florence's position was too unmistakable, and the scandal too recent and well known to be ignored, and if Nicholas went where she could not go, the result was a scene, and, of all things in the world, he hated scenes.

Even Mrs. Kestrell—Mrs. Kestrell, to whom the entry of most English houses was denied—took to herself the satisfaction of cutting Lady Florence, on the Promenade des Anglais at Nice, and afterwards apologising on the ground that her companion at the time was inclined to be particular.

Mr. Delacque would not hear of a divorce.

Once Lady Florence wrote a secret remonstrance to him herself, but it was of no avail.

He wrote in return: "You can scarcely expect me to go to trouble and expense for your benefit, and I can't see any advantage a divorce is likely to bring me. I have never been so comfortable and happy as since I have been deprived of you,

and I have not the smallest desire to marry again. I assure you, I feel that I owe Sir Nicholas Osborne gratitude and have no desire for revenge, so I will not make it necessary for him to marry you. As for what you say further, I conclude I am in no way personally responsible, and feel no more under an obligation to trouble myself for the child than to trouble myself for the mother."

"Cruel, coarse brute!" said Lady Florence, but she could do no more.

Racing, the tables at Monte Carlo, and credit carried them on somehow or other for a long time, but when the baby was born came a crisis in which the doctor's bill was only paid through the help of those presents which Nicholas had given Joanna. The ring, the bangles, the brooches, all went little by little; it was not a time for sentiment—people must live.

It was after this that Ballylone began to appear before them as all that was possible, but many a difficulty did they scramble through before they came to this. They had been stayed for want of money in several places, had left bills behind them in many others, and had found themselves once or twice with only a few shillings between them and utter destitution, before any decisive steps were taken. The thought of Ireland was utterly distasteful to both of them; and, to do him justice, Sir Nicholas would have rather faced any other possibility; but, when it comes to a matter of existence, most people fail to recognise that it is unnecessary that they should exist.

And so they came home, and brought the baby, poor little unnecessary morsel of humanity, with them.

Sir Nicholas, on his seat in the garden, wondered to himself what would be the end of it all; what possibility of existence Ballylone held for him and for Lady Florence.

Then he found that he was cold, and that his seat was hard, and strolled back to the house, hoping, with his usual optimism, that everybody would have more or less shaken down by this time.

But on the stairs was Williams, looking very black indeed.

"I waited to tell you, sir, that I couldn't possibly make up my mind to staying on here any longer than to-morrow. The living is not what I am accustomed to, nor the loneliness."

"You have made up your mind very quickly."

"I couldn't bring myself to say anything else, sir."

"All right; as you please," said Sir Nicholas, and going on a little further he found Mrs. Carroll also on the watch to speak to him.

"I would do a great deal to oblige you, Sir Nicholas," she said, "but I am not accustomed to being treated by a lady as the dirt beneath her feet, and I can't be expected to get through my work if I am to carry one meal to Lady Florence

in her room, and another to the nursery, and another to the maid, who can't even herself to eat with them as is as good as her any day, and with a dinner to cook in the middle of the night, when I ought to be getting the children to their beds——"

"It will all come right in a day or two, I hope," said Sir Nicholas. "I believe Lady Florence's maid is leaving to-morrow, and I am sure Lady Florence did not intend to offend you, Mrs. Carroll."

"Jamie always says I am not easy put out, but I never wore a cap and I'm not going to begin now at her bidding, nor to have her naming me Carroll, like as if I were a man. I would say nothing if she liked to call me Mary Jane. Not but what I would do a good deal for a civil word, and I would be sorry to disoblige you, sir."

"I am sure you would," said Sir Nicholas. "And to please me I am sure you will be respectful to Lady Florence, and remember that she is English. I am sure she did not intend to offend you."

With which he made his escape from Mrs. Carroll, who was acknowledged to have a temper, but had never shown it to him before.

Lady Florence was in her room, a tiny, square room, half filled by the old-fashioned bed, on which she had established herself.

"I should like to know when my boxes are coming," she said; "not that there will be any room for them in this hole. Did you ever know anything more fiendish than that dressing-table? That servant of yours is the rudest creature I ever met. I told her that hideous erection must go as soon as possible, and made her take away the scrubby little mats on it at once, and she flounced out of the room without a word."

Poor Mrs. Carroll! She had vexed her conscience by working late on Sunday to have that dressing-table finished, she had bought the muslin and ribbons herself, and the despised little mats had been her own.

But Sir Nicholas did not know this. He only said sharply:

"You won't have a servant in the house very soon if you go on like that, Florence."

"There isn't as much as a dressing-room for you, Nicholas. I should like to know how you intend to manage."

"Great Scott! I can dress in the lumber-room, for that matter."

"Nor a long glass, nor a sofa——"

"My patience will last about one minute and a half longer," said Nicholas mildly.

"You have ruined my life! I cannot live here—I cannot—I cannot!" cried Lady Florence, bursting into tears.

"I have no more fancy for the place than you have," said Sir Nicholas roughly, "and there is one thing certain, that, if you go on like this, we won't *both* live here long."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"A worthless woman, mere cold clay,
As all false things are ; but so fair
She takes the breath of men away
Who gaze upon her unaware."

It was about eleven o'clock next day when Lady Florence came downstairs in the daintiest of attire.

Sir Nicholas was lounging in a very comfortable long chair, smoking, amidst a surrounding of fishing-rods, riding-whips, and pipes, but he rose at once, when she came into the room, and stooped down to kiss her. She was dressed in a light blue, tailor-made skirt and jacket, with a pretty, fresh, spotted blouse, and her fair hair twisted up with a blue ribbon, and he admired her as he generally did.

"Is our room over the kitchen?" she said. "I have been chased out of it by the smell of cabbage, or something horrible, and upon my word it is just as bad here."

"It's nothing if you are used to it," said Nicholas, who would have grumbled sorely had the house not been his own.

"I acknowledge that I am not used to it. Where is the drawing-room? I have been looking for it in hopes of getting out of the smell."

"This is the drawing-room," said Sir Nicholas.

"Oh!" said Lady Florence, "I see. Exceedingly luxurious! Nick, are you aware that Williams is going and that the nurse is going?"

"I wasn't, but it is just as well, except that, when I pay them their wages, we shall have something like two shillings left to start life here with."

"You may laugh, but will you tell me what is to happen to me and to the baby? If Williams goes, I go too! I won't stay another hour in the house."

"Nonsense, my good girl; give me a kiss and don't be absurd. I can understand that the baby has good reason for apprehension, but you are surely capable of dressing yourself?"

"I have never been without a maid in my life."

"You won't begin younger. Don't make a fuss, like a darling. Let's have peace at any price."

"You are just a mass of selfishness," said Lady Florence;

but she let him kiss her, and condescended to be made comfortable in his chair.

Any improvements that Nicholas had made in the study had been with a view to comfort and not to appearance; the Lodge had been too utterly hopeless in his eyes to be worth troubling about.

There was the one comfortable chair in which he had sat and smoked, many a day before he knew Joanna; in which he had sat and thought about Lady Florence herself many a time and oft; and there was a thick, soft rug covering the shabby carpet in front of the fireplace. That was about all. The carpet was worn to holes in several places, and there was a black mark against the wall where old Kelly's gardening belongings had been only the day before. There were pipe-racks, fishing-rod stands, and some old guns, a couple of racing pictures on the walls, and a few photographs of girls and women whom Nicholas had admired, which he had left behind him when he and Joanna had gone to Merevale.

Lady Florence settled herself in the chair, put her feet on the fender and said the fire was good, glanced at a shelf of dilapidated yellow-backs, and then at the photographs, and finally looked out of the window, and shuddered as she saw the uncared-for avenue, and the little trees swaying about in the wind. It was a cold, gray day, and the lodge looked at its worst.

Then came a knock at the door and Mrs. Carroll made her appearance with the baby; the baby in its spotless little white dress, quiet and contented enough, perhaps feeling something of the motherly touch of her arms. Mrs. Carroll could not forget that the seven little Carrolls, who had come to her almost yearly, and once as a double blessing, had all been as helpless as this, and that this little thing, for all its fine clothes, needed far more pity. Many a slap and rough word did the Carroll children get when something had happened to make their mother's temper a trifle short, but all the same she thought them the finest children in the world, and they knew it.

She believed herself to have excellent reason to be offended with the mother of this poor little nameless creature, but she held it very tenderly and protectingly all the same.

But she was not a model of tidiness; her print dress was by no means in its first freshness, her hair was tousled, and there was a smut on her face.

This was what Lady Florence noticed.

"How dare you come in here like that?" she said. "Did I not tell you never to appear before me again without a cap and a black dress. And, may I ask, what are you doing with the baby? You are not the proper person, and nurse knows that I don't want her at this hour."

Mrs. Carroll's comely face grew red. "As for caps and black dresses," she said, "they don't grow on hedges at Ballylone; and perhaps you would be no better yourself if you had had all the redding up I have been doing this morning to try and please you, ma'am. And for the baby, there's the nurse and the other woman all ready to go, and wanting to know if they could see Sir Nicholas."

"Will you see them, or shall I?" said he unwillingly.

"Oh, I am not going to trouble myself any further; if they will go, they must. But, Nicholas, don't be such a fool as to pay them; if they go off like this there is no reason that you should."

"And who will take the baby?" said Mrs. Carroll.

"Can't you keep it yourself? No, I suppose you had better give it to me. Have you got its bottle?"

"I can't keep the child now, ma'am, if I am to have anything ready for the dinner. And there's Susan gone on a message to the town, and the biggest of the childer at school."

"Well, give her to me," said Lady Florence resignedly. "This dress crumples and will be ruined, but I can't help it."

Upon which, being free from the child, Mrs. Carroll found herself able to make an offended retreat, and to shut the door after her with the suggestion of a slam.

She had been accustomed to have a good deal of her own way ever since her husband had taken the position of caretaker at the Lodge. They had been, as it were, master and mistress of the place, and found themselves in very flourishing circumstances. They both came of a well-to-do stock, with respectable small farmers for their relations and on equality with people, who were, as Mrs. Carroll said herself, "If not the quality, at least the very height of the commonality."

Her husband's uncle kept a servant himself, had seven cows and a bull, also a parlour, decorated with anti-macassars, where nobody ever sat, and where the windows were not opened from one year's end to the other.

Mrs. Carroll felt she was, to a certain extent, lowering herself in condescending to cook for strangers, but Jamie was inclined to be a little "near," and after all she looked upon them rather as lodgers in her house.

It was natural enough that Lady Florence should not recognise any difference of rank between Mrs. Carroll and Susan McNat, the girl whom she had in to help, whose people lived in the poorest part of Ballylone and had never been more than day-labourers at the best. But to Mrs. Carroll the distance seemed as great as that which existed between her and Lady Florence.

While she was civilly treated, she "knew her place," but when she lost her temper she said whatever came uppermost.

Miss Clarke and Mrs. Conway were always civil to her, and, on her side, Mrs. Carroll did not recognise much difference between Lady Florence and Mrs. Conway.

She walked away to the kitchen with her head high, and the three little Carrolls who were too young to go to school had a bad time of it for the rest of the morning.

Meanwhile Lady Florence lay in front of the fire with the baby on her knee, utterly oblivious of the possibility of feelings from Mrs. Carroll, and not even condescending to think twice of her impertinence. To Lady Florence servants were beings of another sphere, with whom all the intercourse necessary was an expression of your wants, which were subsequently fulfilled as a matter of course but never as a matter for gratitude.

The baby lay on her knee, sucking at its bottle contentedly enough, and seemed to have learned already that it must be thankful to have its existence even tolerated.

They made a pretty picture, though they hardly looked like a mother and her child. Lady Florence knew nothing about babies, and considered this one an exceedingly tiresome and inconvenient incident. It had caused her nothing but inconvenience and pain physically, and mentally it was a worry. The child would never be wanted, would always be a trouble and annoyance to everybody; and it was all James Delacque's fault; he was alone to blame for ruining its life before it was born. So Lady Florence said, and so she really thought.

It was there always, to mark a period of her life which some day she might want people to forget.

And it was not even pretty. Lady Florence looked down at the little thing, with its big blue eyes, which the nurse said were like Sir Nicholas', its little soft nose, and mottled cheeks, with a sense of irritation.

She was not taking the smallest control of the bottle, and was exceedingly annoyed when the child took upon itself to choke, in the haste with which it drank, and scattered milk all over her dress. She absolutely shook the baby in her disgust, and then became rather alarmed, and, as the sole idea that came to her, proceeded to pat it on the back.

She did not venture to get up, which she thought might possibly result in letting the child drop, but she rubbed away at the milk stains with her handkerchief, and realised with dismay that she had no maid now to whom she could hand over the dress with a request to have it made all right again.

She was rubbing away hopelessly with one hand while she held the baby with the other, when Sir Nicholas came in.

"Nick, I wish you would take this little wretch," she said.

"I am in an awful mess. I suppose Williams and nurse are gone, and I'll wager you were fool enough to give them what they asked."

"I didn't like to be shabby," said Sir Nicholas deprecatingly. "After all, what's the good of making a fuss about a pound or two."

Sir Nicholas was never ungenerous, and would have made a charming millionaire.

"You are very silly," said Lady Florence, but she, too, did not recognise a pound or two as of much consequence.

The baby, finding its resting-place uncomfortable, with the tightness of its mother's dress and the scantiness of her petticoats, set up a complaining whine.

CHAPTER XL.

"The child's sob in the silence curses deeper
Than the strong man in his wrath."

JOANNA was leaning over the Cliff House avenue gate.

She had gone out, hatless and gloveless, as she liked to go, to have a general inspection of the crops, and had wandered down the avenue to see the people pass who were going to the monthly fair at Ballylone.

There was a certain stir about the constant succession of cattle and their drivers which she liked, and she knew a great many of the people and could exchange a passing good-morning with them.

The wind blew about her fluffy hair, and the watery glimpses of April sun made it shine. She had nothing better to do that afternoon than to stand there by the gate, for outside, for the last two days, she had not ventured.

That last week, with its constant, restless excitement, which would not be conquered, had been very miserable, and she had begun almost to long for the monotony she had hated.

It seemed so strange to think that Nicholas was coming back to this place, where he had asked her to marry him, with another woman; so strange that she would have been less surprised had she awakened to find all this long, bitter year a dream.

And Joanna in her pride, the pride that was for everybody but Nicholas, would not show one sign of difference or excitement, while she knew that everybody was watching her.

She worked away at her carving, and nobody but herself recognised the difference in the result. She was annoyed to

find that things would not go quite right with her, try as she would.

But she could not trust herself to meet Nicholas—could not feel how she would be able to bear the bitter pain of being treated by him as a stranger, of finding that he had forgotten. And if he had not—that would be worse still. As a rule she had plenty of faith in herself, but at present she recognised with anger that, under given circumstances, she absolutely could not depend upon herself.

Yet, if Nicholas and Lady Florence were coming to live at Ballylone, Joanna could not remain indoors for the rest of her life; and even if she could bring herself to try and persuade her father to let her go away, she could not remain away forever.

She had learnt to drive her trouble to the background of her mind, to put away the thoughts that flashed into her head, and to be generally fairly successful, by dint of being constantly busy, as long as daylight lasted. But now she could not do this any longer.

Joanna did not feel as if she could have another moment's peace and comfort, with this constant, daily possibility hanging over her.

She could never get up without feeling that that day she might see him; never go out without knowing she might meet him before she returned.

Was he happy? she wondered; feeling that, if he was, it would be easier for her. And was he married to Lady Florence? Joanna had never asked, but during the whole year she had searched the papers for divorce cases, and *Delacque v. Delacque* and *Osborne* had not been there.

If he was happy and if he had married her, then, and then only to a certain extent, would Joanna feel herself free from the promises she had made him, and from the responsibility which she had taken upon herself when she had promised to be his wife.

She would be true to him, true all her life; he must know he might always depend upon her if the time should come when she could help him, or even *her*, for his sake, but perhaps—probably—the time would never come, or perhaps he would not believe he could trust to her to feel nothing toward him but the most complete faithfulness.

She had told him one day that she was "his, to take or leave."

Joanna had been carving hard since eight o'clock, and her hand was tired. She leaned over the gate, dreamily watching the passers-by, and picturing to herself a time, long, long years hence, when she, perhaps grown rich by her carving, could come to help his children or even his wife. And they would meet, calmly as friends, while neither of them forgot, and he would come to her, depending unhesitatingly upon her.

Even Polly was an interruption—Polly, who, free from her lessons as twelve o'clock struck, came dancing down the avenue, a bright, active little figure, and clambered to the top of the gate with restless legs.

"Will you finish the screen this afternoon, Aunt Joanna?" she said. "It is to-morrow we should take it—it will be my birthday."

"Oh, then it must be finished," said Joanna. "Run and order some paste, dear."

"Paste doesn't take a minute," exclaimed Polly, without moving.

"And oh, Polly, what a disgraceful hole in your stocking! How in the world did you make it?"

"It only shows because my dress is tucked up," said the little girl complacently. "Can't we go out, Aunt Joanna? The cows have done coming, and it is dull."

"I can't go this morning, but there is nothing to prevent you, if you don't go into the fair."

But Polly had no desire to go alone.

She sat on the gate, contentedly talking to Joanna, telling her one of her long rambling stories of what was to happen when she was rich, while Joanna was able to give herself up to thinking again.

She was aroused this time by discovering that Polly had wriggled off the gate and was pulling at her dress.

"Come into the road," she said. "I see Susan McNat coming with the doctor's last baby. Do let us speak to it."

Polly had a passion for babies of all sizes and ages. She would sit for hours on the kitchen floor at McCracken's with the baby on her small knees, and had once publicly implored her mother, to that lady's great embarrassment, to give her a little baby brother.

"Do let us stop Susan, Aunt Joanna," she said. "It is such a sweet little baby, and she will let me feel its tooth."

"I thought Susan had left the Morelands," said Joanna.

Personally she did not share Polly's admiration for little babies; she liked them when they could speak and run about, but there was no reason in the world why she should not speak to Susan McNat, who was in her mother's Sunday-school class, and she generally did what Polly wanted.

She had never seen the doctor's baby so spruce before, with its little white lace mantle and bonnet, and even a tiny white sunshade to keep off the extremely watery sun.

"Oh, the sweet little dear!" said Polly. "Oh, please let me hold it for one minute, Susan! Or, if I mustn't, let me feel its tooth."

"You can't do that, Miss Polly; it hasn't got no tooth," said Susan.

"Oh, you didn't pull it out?" said Polly, distressed. "I could feel it quite well."

"But this isn't the doctor's baby, Miss Polly," said Susan, growing a little red.

"Another dear little baby—oh, Aunt Joanna, it is a different little baby."

"Whose child is it?" said Joanna, absolutely unsuspecting, in a way that seemed to her afterwards very odd.

"It is Sir Nicholas Osborne's, Miss Joanna. I have just brought it out from the Lodge," said Susan.

Sir Nicholas Osborne's baby! A sudden stab of pain almost made Joanna cry out, and then came that old heartache at its worst, and a sudden dizzy feeling.

But outwardly there was no change, and it was really only a minute that had passed before she turned to Susan and said: "It is a pretty little thing, but you had better move on, it is cold standing," and Polly raised no protest.

She knew there was some reason that Sir Nicholas must never be spoken about again to Joanna—Sir Nicholas whom Polly had been so fond of; and after a vague, childish fashion she had ideas of her own on the subject.

As for Joanna, she walked blindly up the avenue with the child at her heels, and a pain as fresh as in the first moment when she had realised her trouble.

Had she hoped till now? Not consciously for a moment, but otherwise, why should everything all at once seem harder to bear?

A child—a link which bound him always, always to Lady Florence; a child which she had seen, which she had touched—a child which might have been hers.

Nicholas' child, but Lady Florence's child too.

If it had come to Joanna—if it had been hers, theirs—how she would have loved it and cared for it, for its own sake and for its father's; and how it would have been something to link them together all their lives long.

Joanna felt vaguely that this was a closer bond between him and Lady Florence than any marriage vow.

And she had nothing to do with his child. They three were bound together, and she would always be alone and always outside.

Joanna had few illusions about Nicholas now. She knew he was neither a good man nor a trustworthy man; she knew that her faith in him was gone forever; but she knew, too, that no man, respect and admire him as she might, would ever be the same to her as this first unworthy lover of hers. She could never give her love to another man as she had given it to him; keeping back nothing, fearing nothing, believing him as true as God in heaven.

CHAPTER XLI.

"I would that you were all to me,
You that are just so much, no more,
Nor yours, nor mine—nor slave, nor free !
Where does the fault lie ? Where the core of the
wound since wound must be."

EVERY succeeding day at the Lodge seemed to Lady Florence worse than the day before.

She had always thought she liked the country, but her idea of the country was a big house filled with people and daily entertainments, and above all, with plenty of men at her feet.

Even in her schoolroom days, as an exceptionally pretty girl, she had managed to amuse herself. She and Lady Hilda had always been allowed to attend the meets, under the care of their father and a couple of grooms; and while Lady Hilda had thought of nothing but the run, Lady Florence had contrived to pass the day in her own fashion. If she had ever cared for anyone in her life it had been for a certain penniless youth who had contrived to see a good deal of her in those days, and who had gone off to India with a lock of her hair, and a promise of correspondence, which she had kept for a whole twelve months.

Ten years later she had met him at a big West End crush, and was pleased to find that while the years had only improved her, he had grown stout and slightly bald. He took her for an ice and introduced her to his wife, an insipid little creature very shabbily dressed, and knowing nobody. Neither of them was particularly affected by the meeting. Lady Florence wondered what he had done with the lock of her hair, and if he remembered how he had kissed her good-bye under the chestnuts one wet evening when they had lost the groom and ridden home from hunting together. But there had never been any real hope about the business, and she was very far from envying his wife, who had half a dozen children and shabby clothes.

They only met once, for their circles in London lay apart.

Lady Florence was the fashion; she was an established London beauty and much sought after. She had been pleased to know Sir Nicholas because he meant the box-seat on the Guards' coach, and because he was a creditable person to take about, but she had not thought much more of him than of the rest till he had made an effort to shake himself free of her thralldom.

This had annoyed her, and that a country girl who was not even pretty should be her successor annoyed her still more.

Lady Florence was selfish ; completely and unconsciously selfish.

It never even occurred to her to consider other people's feelings, or to try to see anything from their point of view.

When Mr. Delacque declared his intention of spending the season in Northumberland, she was ready enough to see a wrong and an injury to her, which more than justified any action on her part.

When Sir Nicholas' money came to an end, she discovered that he too had injured her, and in Ballylone there was reproach in every look she gave him and every word she said to him.

It was undoubtedly terribly dull and uncomfortable.

Lady Florence did not know how to unpack her clothes, and when they were unpacked there was nowhere to put them. The Lodge was a damp house, a dampness which had been attributed to the trees, but which had remained behind when they were cut down. There were damp patches on the walls downstairs which were far from cheerful, and the wall presses, in which the house abounded and which would otherwise have been useful, were wet and mildewed. So there was only a wardrobe and a chest of drawers in which to dispose of the contents of half a dozen trunks.

Lady Florence did not know how to do her hair, and it tired her, and she had not the remotest idea how to dress and undress the baby, and nearly drowned it the one and only time she attempted to give it its bath.

Susan McNat undertook it after this, and she knew something about babies, though she considered such frequent baths unnecessary.

As for Mrs. Carroll, she and Lady Florence were in a constant state of feud, and Mrs. Carroll declared half a dozen times a day that but for her husband and children she would not have been another hour in the house.

If she had been a Roman Catholic she would have crossed herself whenever she met Lady Florence; as it was, she only looked at her with horror-struck eyes and exclamations under her breath of "The Lord save us!" "Did ever anyone see the like?" "By all that's holy!"

Mrs. Carroll had never before met a lady who smoked and preferred whiskey and soda to tea, and when Lady Florence turned her long-handled eyeglass upon the Carroll children, their mother snatched them away as from some evil thing.

The very first evening a couple of rings from Lady Florence's room brought up Mrs. Carroll, very hot and flustered over dinner preparations.

Lady Florence was lounging over the fire with a novel and a cigarette.

"You rung, ma'am?" said Mrs. Carroll shortly.

"Put on some more coal, please," said Lady Florence, without looking up.

"And the scuttle standing there to her hand!" said Mrs. Carroll, in high indignation, when she afterwards related the tale, "and me called up from the bottom of the house, in the middle of seeing to the dinner!"

As Mrs. Carroll said, Lady Florence, in herself, would have been work for a regiment of servants.

The stormy atmosphere drove Nicholas up to Derry, where he stayed for the night, and enjoyed himself, while in his absence Lady Florence found the Lodge worse than ever.

She went down to the village once, creating an immense sensation there. She wore high boots and a very short shooting dress, and she strolled along with her hands in the pockets of her covert coat, and a cigarette in her mouth, rather entertained by the fashion in which the natives rushed to their doors to stare at her.

But it was an entertainment which did not bear to be repeated.

What was she to do? Was she to get up every morning for the rest of her life, with a long, long day before her, exactly the same as the one before? Even lying in bed and reading novels till lunch time palled upon her, and there did not seem to be any object in getting up then or ever. Nicholas was thinking of selling the Witch, and was teaching Benedict to jump. He smoked a great deal, and had taken to sleeping after dinner.

This she bore for almost a week, and then she could bear it no longer. She came upon him one evening as he dozed over the fire and shook him by the shoulder till he woke and looked up at her with sleepy blue eyes.

"Nick," she said, "you will get detestable if you go on like this."

"It doesn't matter much, does it?" he said crossly. He did not like being suddenly awakened.

"You have brought me to this, Nick, and you must tell me if you expect me to spend the rest of my life here."

"Oh, hang it all, Florence, how can I tell? It will all dry straight somehow, I suppose."

"And in the meantime I shall go mad or kill myself. If I was your wife, Nick, you would have more consideration for me," Lady Florence ended reproachfully, using an argument she had always found very effective.

"Look here, Florence, what am I to do? I can't coin money, and I can't make old Delacque consent to a divorce."

"You can't coin money, but, I suppose, you could make it like any other man, if you chose," said Lady Florence.

"There's Meredyth, for instance——"

"And if I went to Meredyth for help, don't you know as well as I do what his first condition would be?"

"If you had any pluck you would find some way of making something to take us away from here!"

"Well, what do you say to my running over to Ascot or the Derby, this spring?" said Nicholas, with hesitation.

At which Lady Florence gave a little cry and seized him by the arm.

"I know what that means!" she said. "You want to get away and amuse yourself and leave me behind. You shall not go from this place without me—I will not stand it!"

"Oh, all right," returned Nicholas. He never tried to gain the day by force. If he made up his mind to go, he would go without a word or a dispute. Lady Florence knew it.

"There is no good in making you promise," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders, "because I haven't the smallest faith in your promises. But I am not easily made a fool of, Nick. One thing I tell you plainly: I cannot live in this place without a soul to speak to."

CHAPTER XLII.

"I would not for her, white and pink,
Though such he likes—her grace of limb :
Though such he has praised—nor yet I think
For life itself, though spent with him,
Commit such sacrilege, affront
God's nature, which is love, intrude
T'wixt two affianced souls."

"NICK, I am going to church ; will you come ?"

Nicholas, who had just come in from the stables, in knickerbockers and a shooting coat, gave a very decided negative. Like most riding men, his legs were not at their best in knickerbockers, a fact of which he was far from being aware.

"Being in the country, it is our duty to show a good example," said Lady Florence, "and as they have service here at the outlandish hour of twelve, it doesn't require too great an effort. Nick, you had better change your mind."

She had taken some trouble to dress herself for the amazement of the Ballylone natives, which showed how very low she had fallen for lack of entertainment. She had put on a pretty dress of gray and pink, marvellously and wonderfully intermingled, with a big gray hat and a gray feather boa. She had a gray and pink sunshade, and the silk of her petticoats rustled as she moved.

"I know I might go much more appropriately in a sack and

boot-laces," she said, "but I had a fancy it would be kind to show these people what a really well-dressed woman was like, for once. But admire me, dear, before I go, because I know I shan't be half appreciated."

Nicholas did admire her very much and he said so. He walked down the avenue with her, and she took his arm and leaned upon it, keeping very close to him, and at the gate he drew her back to kiss her with a sudden ardour which she laughed at, but which flattered her.

Lady Florence was very well pleased with herself. She knew she was looking her very best, and concluded if there were any natives in this country worthy of speech she would see them now, and, most of all, she wished to confront Joanna, and prove to her in one moment how impossible it had been for her to dream of competition.

She wished Sir Nicholas to see them together, to compare them, to recognise her immeasurable superiority; but to see them together was the one thing which Nicholas had made up his mind to avoid.

The church bell had just stopped as Lady Florence made her way up to the door, and there was a rush of people who, after the wont of country churchgoers, had stayed outside till the last minute.

Lady Florence waited till they had all passed in, and then made her own entrance very sedately.

The opening sentences and Exhortation were just over, and there was a general bustle of preparation for the Confession; but Lady Florence's entrance caused a pause. She walked up the aisle slowly, with that rustle of silk to which the inhabitants of Ballylone were not accustomed, and though the eyes of the whole congregation were turned upon her she was not in the least embarrassed.

She made a leisurely inspection of seats, and finally turned into the first cushioned one she came to. It had been the Clarkes' from time immemorial, and Miss Clarke was alone in it now, and had just sunk on her knees.

The pause, in which even Mr. Jellett had shared, had come to an end and he began the General Confession.

"We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts," said Mr. Jellett, and the whole congregation looked at Lady Florence.

"We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done."

Miss Clarke rose from her knees, gathered together her prayer-book, hymn-book, and umbrella, and passed out of the seat, holding her dress closely round her that it might not come in contact with Lady Florence, and the congre-

gation again looked at her to see how she bore this severe reproof.

But Lady Florence did not so much as trouble herself to think why an ill-dressed old woman should change her pew. She established herself in a corner, and surveyed her fellow-worshippers through her long-handled eyeglass with much *sans façon*, and when she had finished looking at those who were in front of her, she turned calmly round to study the rest.

She soon discovered Joanna, two pews in front of her, dressed in a dark blue serge, which fitted her better than her dresses had been used to fit, but which was still far removed from any rivalry with Lady Florence's.

She was conscious of Lady Florence's entrance, though she had not looked round—she was too much afraid that there might be someone else. But of the service she did not hear a word.

A good many other people had their attention distracted. The elders whispered and shook their heads, the girls gazed at Lady Florence with a sort of guilty curiosity.

The Collards, who only occasionally came to Ballylone church, looked at her as if they half expected horns and a tail to sprout forth, and still could not help being struck with a something about herself and her dresses which they could never hope to attain.

Mr. Jellett thought he had never seen anyone so lovely in his life, and lost his place in the Commandments.

Lady Florence was conscious that everybody was looking at her, and she liked it. She was completely at her ease, and absolutely incapable of being disturbed by these rustics; it was natural that they should admire her, poor creatures.

And all through the service, all through the prayers and hymns and sermon, Joanna was preparing herself for the meeting that might follow; was steeling herself to be brave, and making up her mind what to do and say.

It was almost a disappointment when she found there was no reason for special courage—that only Lady Florence walked out of church in front of them.

Outside the church door she paused and waited for Joanna. In her utter destitution of amusement it was something to see a person she had known in happier days, though in those days they had seldom exchanged a word; the possibility of a country solicitor's family feeling anything but honoured by her notice had scarcely entered her head.

She held out her hand to Joanna with her sweetest smile.

"I hope you have not forgotten me, Miss Conway," she said.

Joanna hesitated, flushing deeply. She had not forgiven

Lady Florence, though she had said in church half an hour ago: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us."

Lady Florence did not look at all to be pitied; she was smart and smiling and self-possessed, and not at all bowed down by her sin.

But she was perhaps Nicholas' wife; she was certainly the mother of his child, and it was not for Joanna to make the position to which he had brought himself harder.

She held out her hand to Lady Florence, for Nicholas' sake, but she said nothing.

"I am so glad to see you again," said Lady Florence, "Will you let bygones be bygones and come to see me? I know you are a great friend of my sister's."

But even as she spoke came Mrs. Conway out of the church, with eyes large with horror and dismay, and she seized Joanna by the arm: "Come away at once," she said, in her most imperative tones, tones which once had carried terror to Joanna's heart. "How dare that woman so much as touch you? Am I to stand by and see my daughter contaminated?"

Joanna turned on her mother with a look which Mrs. Conway had never seen before. It seemed to her that this woman, whom Nicholas had chosen, was standing there in a strange place, with everybody against her because she had counted the world well lost for love.

With a sudden impulse of pity, she held out her hand to Lady Florence again.

"Good-bye," she said, "I—I hope you don't find the Lodge very damp."

The words were ludicrously insufficient, but they meant so much which could not be said.

But Lady Florence was exceedingly capable of defending herself.

She raised her eyeglass and turned it on Mrs. Conway, surveying her with a calm curiosity, a well-bred insolence, which that lady could not attempt to rival.

She said nothing, only surveyed her assailant from the top of her old-fashioned bonnet to the soles of her boots with a sweeping glance of amused disdain, and then, with a nod of farewell to Joanna, she turned away and sauntered down the church path in front of them.

She was in front of them as far as Cliff House gate, and she enjoyed it; she knew she walked well, and she walked slowly, knowing they would not pass her, till Mrs. Conway and Joanna wished they had disregarded the mud of the lane and gone by the short cut.

Lady Florence was highly delighted with herself when she

got home, and said so to Nicholas, who had slept and smoked and read all morning and been bored to distraction.

"You ought to have come with me," she said, making for herself a place beside him in his long chair. "It was most amusing, and I never saw people stare more."

"I daresay," said Nicholas gruffly. "Aren't you going to take off your hat before lunch?"

He wished, and yet he did not wish, to hear something more of that morning.

"It is not necessary to make many preparations to eat the fag-end of a chicken and a scraggy leg of mutton," said Lady Florence, "and as it is, Carroll has made enough fuss because we won't dine in the middle of the day on Sundays. I don't see any reason for being more uncomfortable that day than any other, do you? But to return, I got a seat to myself about two behind Miss Conway and her belongings."

Nicholas said nothing; he turned his head a little away, and began to fill his pipe.

"Positively, I believe you blush, Nick!" said Lady Florence cheerfully. "Well, you might be thankful to escape such a mother-in-law—a regular old termagant, with dresses made in the year One. No doubt Miss Conway inherits her temper."

"Drop it, Florence. Don't speak of her," said Nicholas shortly.

"I should like to know why not?" said Lady Florence. "If I am not to speak of her I have spoken to her."

"You spoke to her—to Joanna?"

"I did, simple as I sit here," said Lady Florence, "which suggests to me that you might move over and give me a little more room."

Nicholas got up altogether, and moved to the fireplace, looking about for the match-box, but when he had found it he did not immediately proceed to make any use of it.

"What did she say?" he asked, after a minute.

"What did she say? Nothing very remarkable, I fancy. In fact all that I can remember is that she said she hoped we did not find the house damp."

"Rubbish," said Nicholas.

"It is perfectly true, I assure you."

"Was she—changed?" said Nicholas, with much hesitation.

"She didn't look in the least as if she were going into a decline, if that is what you mean. She had got rather fewer freckles than I remember, her boots were very muddy, and the thumb of her right-hand glove had been mended with thread which did not quite match. There! don't say I haven't brought you sufficiently full particulars."

Nicholas sighed impatiently, but he did not say any more. He did not want to hear of Joanna from Lady Florence.

He had managed to put her very fairly successfully out of his head while they had been abroad with plenty of amusement, and even now he was perhaps not so much disturbed by regret, as by an utter dissatisfaction with life.

He and Lady Florence had come to a time which comes generally even to the most happily married couples, a time when they constantly managed to irritate and rub each other up wrong, and when the friendship which is very needful as a background to love was called for, and was called for in vain. There was no friendship between Lady Florence and her lover.

In every way they seemed to have come to a dead wall. Nicholas, no more than Lady Florence, was resigned to the idea of spending the rest of his life in Ballylone, but neither had he the energy to exert himself to get some way out of it, some way of making money. And indeed there would have been many difficulties before him. He just let things slide from day to day, hoping against hope that a vague "something" would turn up.

If someone would leave him a fortune, and Mr. Delacque would die or consent to a divorce, he would marry Lady Florence, and be a good man and an honest man.

But failing these eventualities what was to be the end of it all ?

CHAPTER XLIII.

"And your sentence is written all the same,
And I can do nothing—pray, perhaps :
But somehow the world pursues its game,
If I pray, if I curse—for better or worse :
And my faith is torn to a thousand scraps,
And my heart feels ice when thy words breathe flame."

LADY FLORENCE'S appearance in church created an immense commotion in Ballylone, and somehow seemed to emphasise her wickedness to everybody.

Mrs. Conway made the allusion to her at morning prayers next day so pointed as to be unmistakable, and summoned Miss Clarke and Mr. Jellett to Cliff House in the afternoon to discuss the engrossing topic.

Miss Clarke was radiant with virtue, but Mr. Jellett was nervous and depressed.

"This cannot be permitted," said Mrs. Conway emphatically, and, as far as her hearers were concerned, not at all vaguely.

"It cannot," Miss Clarke chimed in, for once in perfect accord. "That sinful woman must not be allowed to pollute our holy church ; she must not be allowed to contaminate our young people by her words and touch."

"She only spoke to Joanna because she knew her before, when they were staying together with the Earl of Meredyth," interposed Mrs. Conway, a little annoyed. Vain as were all things of earth, she had a certain unacknowledged satisfaction in Joanna's having stayed in the same house with Lady Florence.

"How she dares in her effrontery to seat herself among true worshippers, to hear the Commandments, which she is breaking, read!"

"I went to Mrs. McNat yesterday about her little Susan, who has been taken into that evil house," said Mrs. Conway, "and as the mother refused, on my solemn warning, to take the child away, I have been obliged to refuse to allow her to come to me in Sunday-school any longer. Something must be done."

And Miss Clarke chimed in: "Something must be done."

Mr. Jellett looked overwhelmed.

"I quite agree with you—I quite agree," he said, as he always did, "but I can't do anything. I can't turn her out of the church, you know."

"Can't do anything? Can't turn her out of the church?" cried Miss Clarke, "but you *must*. You must visit her and represent her sin to her—you must write to the bishop—you must——"

"I don't think the bishop could do anything either," said Mr. Jellett mildly.

"Do you mean to say that the Church cannot interfere when a woman comes and lives in open sin in our midst, comes as an emissary from the devil, whose example may destroy many, many of the souls of your flock?"

"I am afraid I can do nothing, except visit her, if you think it would be of any good," said Mr. Jellett timidly, immensely embarrassed by the conversation.

"It is your duty, your bounden duty to do so," said Mrs. Conway gravely. "Perhaps you may bring her to view her sinfulness in the right light—to see for herself that she is on the way to perdition, and to free herself from the chains of hell and the devil while there is yet time. It is your duty to go to her, the parish expects it, *I* expect it."

"Of course, if you think it necessary," said Mr. Jellett uncomfortably. "It is a painful task, but I agree with you—I quite agree with you."

"It is a Christian task," said Mrs. Conway, "and you will feel it is so when you kneel before her hardened eyes, and pray that she may be led to turn away from the broad path that leadeth to destruction, or at least that others may be saved from being led astray by her sinful example."

"Tell her that, long as she may live among us, she can

never hope that we will receive her into our midst," said Miss Clarke.

"But by prayer, penitence, and good works she may make herself to be accepted by God," added Mrs. Conway, evidently considering that He was less particular about His society.

"I quite agree with you," said Mr. Jellett meekly, upon which he made his escape with the excuse of a choir practice, and Mrs. Conway and Miss Clarke found Lady Florence's character in their hands.

"I am thankful I have not a son to be led into sin," said Mrs. Conway.

"I have a brother," said Miss Clarke, solemnly shaking her head.

But even Mrs. Conway did not think there was much danger for sedate, elderly Mr. Clarke, with a pimpled nose which wronged him, and not an idea beyond the tenants and the crops.

"The strange woman of the Scriptures has come into our midst," said Mrs. Conway solemnly. "From the temptations of the Evil One, good Lord deliver us."

And then Joanna came in, and there was a dead silence, one of those silences which tried her more than any speech.

Just now, with her heart full of pain and trouble, she could not bear it, and broke out with hot impetuosity :

"Why do you always stop talking when I come in ?" she cried.

There was a shocked pause.

"Joanna !" said Mrs. Conway reprovingly.

"Well ?" said Joanna, with much irritation. "Why ?"

"Because, my dear, we are speaking of a subject which is unfit for the ears of a young girl," said Miss Clarke.

"A subject which you know nothing about," said Mrs. Conway decidedly.

"Now that is nonsense," said Joanna, with a short laugh.

"Because I am a girl, do you think I am a fool ? Do you think my eyes are shut to what passes directly in front of them ? Do you think I don't know all about it, and who you are talking about, as well or better than you who have lived all your lives at Ballylone ?"

"Has a bad example borne fruit so soon ?" said Miss Clarke to Mrs. Conway.

"Joanna, go to your room," said Mrs. Conway, in the tones she had used when Joanna was six years old. "We are speaking of one whose name is unfit for your ears, who is too hardened in sin to turn to the right."

"And what is the right ?" cried Joanna passionately. "Is it the right for her to leave the man who loves her, and the little baby that is his and hers ? You who have never *lived* a day of your lives—you can sit down here to judge one whose

temptations you know nothing about. If it were me, I should not leave him !”

Mrs. Conway almost shrieked.

“Joanna, what are you saying? How can you compare yourself to that sinful woman? Is this the end of my years of care, of the pains I have taken to keep you pure and innocent?”

“But oh! it would be better if you were not so hard, if you had a little more pity—for me too!” said Joanna, and then she moved suddenly out of the room, leaving her mother in a distress which was quite real.

Joanna herself did not know what sudden impulse had come to her to speak out. It was the knowledge of the whispers around her in all directions, and the half-concealed pity which almost drove her mad. Did they think that if they did not speak she would see and know nothing? From Elizabeth she had found out the night before that Sir Nicholas and Lady Florence were not married, and with the baby as a link between them this had seemed to her a trouble the more, a trouble that, knowing Sir Nicholas as she knew him, made her hope of seeing him some day a good man the less.

It did not even occur to her that it made a reconciliation between them possible; the baby was to her a stronger tie than any marriage, and anything to unite her and Nicholas was impossible now.

All the purity and faith and brightness of their engagement was impossible—could never be again.

Joanna had no confidante; she had never had anyone to tell her thoughts and hopes and troubles to except Nicholas, and now there was nobody at all.

Nothing, she knew, could ever be the same again as it had been not much more than a year ago, but for all that she had her life to live like other people. If Nicholas had died, that one happy year would have been something to have looked back upon and have given her courage for ever, but indeed if it had been only death which had come between them, she would not have lacked courage; he would have been always her own, there would have been his memory, which soon would have been all sweet, and which would have helped always through the life which it would have been hers to render worth something for his sake.

Some day, perhaps, even as things were, the bitterness in the remembrance of that year would fade away, but happen what might, neither in this world or the next could Nicholas be hers again.

Joanna had ceased to wish that they should not meet. Now that he had come here it must happen some day, and the sooner it was passed and gone the better.

It was the only way in which life could settle down again to be more possible and less agitating.

To live as she had lived during these last few days was not possible.

Nothing could come of seeing him again but pain, but even that was better than living with the constant expectation of seeing him.

"And the saddest thing of all," said Joanna to herself, "would be to meet and not care."

CHAPTER XLIV.

"I warn you, men, take earnest heed,
Let not bright eyes your sight mislead."

POOR Mr. Jellett was very much perplexed and very miserable.

The idea of visiting and rebuking Lady Florence Delacque for the error of her ways was to him appalling, and would, he felt convinced, result in no good.

It was only a few months since he had gone to visit the daughter of one of his parishioners who had come to trouble, and sinned and been sinned against, and the utter embarrassment of that visit was still fresh in his memory. He had sat opposite to her with burning face and words that would not come, till the girl herself, who was about his own age, had come to his assistance.

And that was as nothing to what lay before him now.

Lady Florence's title impressed him a little undoubtedly; Mr. Jellett, belonging to the English middle class—a class non-existent in Ireland, had a due respect and reverence for titles.

But worse than this, Lady Florence was the loveliest woman he had ever seen. She had come upon him, driving Miss Chester completely out of his head, and yet he knew that when he saw her again it must be as a mentor, and he had a well-founded doubt of his own courage under the circumstances.

He did not go during that week, though he made up his mind to the effort every morning, and it was not till he had seen her once more in his church that he took a decided step. It was Sacrament Sunday, and during the service he had suffered untold agonies. If she elected to stay in, what was he to do? What steps was he to take?

She was looking lovelier than ever, he thought, and as calm, serene, and untroubled. She had come to church this Sunday

in her "sack and boot-laces," which, being interpreted, was a serge dress and a sailor hat, and looked very young and fresh.

Mr. Jellett was unspeakably relieved when she left the church after the blessing, and the very next day he went up to the Lodge to see her, with many qualms at heart.

In the perturbation of his spirits he scarcely knew his Sunday-school scholar, Susan McNat, when she opened the hall-door for him, and gave her his name, as if they had never met before.

And then he was ushered into the office, and into a little domestic scene which was most disturbing.

Lady Florence was sitting over the fire with the baby fast asleep on her knee. There were few changes in the room since Mr. Jellett had last seen it. Lady Florence looked upon attempts of improvement as hopeless, and besides, did not like the idea of having to carry them out herself.

She was very dull that afternoon, bored to such an extent that even the baby had been a distraction, and she was delighted to see Mr. Jellett. Even a pink and white little clergyman, overwhelmed with shyness, was better than nobody.

"I am so glad to meet you," she said sweetly. "You must excuse my getting up, as I don't want to wake the child. I have been hoping you would call."

Under the present circumstances, not even Mr. Jellett was unworthy of a little pleasant flattery.

He shook hands with Lady Florence and sat down beside her, trying to remember what he had made up his mind to say.

With his hostess before him, with the baby lying there contentedly, and twining its little mottled fingers round its mother's hand, everything seemed harder than ever.

"I have been intending to come for some time," he said.

"If you hated your own company as much as I do," said Lady Florence, "you would have some idea how welcome you are. Don't let us talk loud, or we shall wake the baby, and then farewell to all peace. Mr. Jellett, I don't know how you live in this place; don't you feel the dulness?"

"I have plenty to do—I am always busy," said Mr. Jellett.

"And I am an idle individual, so the dulness nearly kills me."

It was a good opening, and could not be neglected.

"You could leave this place," said Mr. Jellett, crimsoning at his own temerity.

"There's nothing I should like better," returned Lady Florence; "but," she added, with a shrug of her shoulders,

"there are all sorts of drawbacks, Mr. Jellett. If you ask Nicholas, he will give you a thousand reasons."

Then Mr. Jellett made a great effort ; if he was afraid of Lady Florence, he was considerably more afraid of Mrs. Conway, and he might not have as good an opportunity for speaking again.

He said : "Oh, Lady Florence, it is you yourself I am speaking of. Let me urge you—let me entreat you to—to—"

Here he came to utter grief.

Lady Florence meditated, leaving Mr. Jellett to suffer all the embarrassment of his unfinished words. Should she utterly crush this little country clergyman, who had been so impertinent as to dream of rebuking her, or was the triumph of bringing him over to her side, despite his principles and his disapproval, worth the trouble of being a little sweet ?

A few weeks ago, in spite of her predilection for mankind, she would have decided that it was not, but now, after her experience of Ballylone dulness, she thought that there might be some amusement even in this little man's society and admiration.

So she looked at him very sadly, and sighed before she spoke.

"I thought," she said, "that you had come to see me out of kindness. Mr. Jellett, I am not a happy woman. Don't go away leaving me a little more miserable than I was when you came."

Mr. Jellett felt a glow of pleasure and gratified vanity. Was he after all to succeed beyond the wildest desires ? Was it possible that his words had such an effect upon the loveliest woman he had ever seen ? He began to feel the full joy of duty fulfilled.

"Then you won't refuse to listen to me, if I urge you to leave this life—to turn to the right——" he began, with increasing courage.

"But indeed I cannot listen to you to-day," said Lady Florence meekly. "Wait till we know each other a little better, and then I can perhaps tell you the whole miserable story. I can't speak of such trouble to a stranger."

"But in the meantime—can I not be useful in any way to take you from here ?"

"I have nowhere in the wide world to go to," said Lady Florence, with touching candour.

She knew that her very easy conquest was gained, and the way in which it had been gained did not trouble her pride. Her pride had never been troublesome in her relations with men.

She sat there in the dusk with Mr. Jellett, fascinating and

bewildering the unfortunate man till he hardly knew what he was doing.

And then Nicholas came in, greeted him warmly, and asked Lady Florence why she had not ordered tea, laying his hand caressingly on her shoulder ; and the baby woke, and smiled up in Mr. Jellett's face till Mrs. Carroll was summoned to take it away. They all sat round the fire together and Lady Florence made tea, while Mr. Jellett rebuked himself for thinking that they were the pleasantest people he had ever met, and forgot that his own position in their midst was not likely to be approved of by Mrs. Conway.

He would have departed without another word said of the many he had intended to say, if Nicholas had not taken it into his head to stroll down the avenue with him, thereby giving the susceptible youth a little time to recover from Lady Florence's influence.

Consequently, when Nicholas shook hands with him at the gate, and said that he hoped to see him often, Mr. Jellett spoke out.

"It is impossible for me to visit in your house, except as a clergyman, Sir Nicholas," he said, and Sir Nicholas, after staring at him for a minute, and growing rather red, answered with his grandest manner, and a slight stammer : "Indeed ? Clergymen are not particularly in our line, so we needn't trouble you."

Mr. Jellett went home, convinced that Lady Florence was but the victim of Sir Nicholas' guilty passion, and that it lay in his power, and in his duty, to bring her back to the paths of right.

But his somewhat lame account of his visit by no means satisfied Mrs. Conway. Charity was not a strong point of her character, and she was not unnaturally prepared to think the worst of the woman who had so injured Joanna. She was not inclined to agree with Mr. Jellett, in thinking her a repentant, and injured woman, and before the end of that week came she had made up her mind to see how things were for herself.

Was there a certain amount of curiosity mingled with her virtue ? If there was, Mrs. Conway herself did not know it.

She dressed herself in black, with a certain sense of appropriateness, but she put on her newest bonnet, which was not very new, and a pair of gloves she had never worn before.

She was not at all afraid of lacking words, not even should she meet Sir Nicholas, who had in old times been rather a favourite of hers.

Lady Florence was lounging over the fire in a state of boredom, and waiting for Nicholas, who was somewhere about the stables, when Mrs. Conway's ring came at the door.

There was nobody in the house to answer it ; Susan McNat was out with the baby, which she had no business to be, at six o'clock in the evening, and Mrs. Carroll was milking the one cow, surrounded by children.

Consequently, after listening to a couple of rings and a good deal of knocking, Lady Florence made up her mind to see who was at the door, partly because the knocking and ringing annoyed her, and partly because she had a certain curiosity, born of idleness, to know who was there.

She knew very well what Mrs. Conway had come for, but she was delighted to see her ; she was cross and bored, and just in the humour for a battle—a battle in which she had an untroubled conviction that she would be on the winning side.

"Do come in," she said sweetly. "Have you had tea? Ours is over, but I can have some made for you in a minute."

"Thank you, no," said Mrs. Conway solemnly.

"Come in to the lamp and the fire, then," said Lady Florence, still agreeable. "How is Miss Conway?"

"I wonder, Lady Florence Delacque," said Mrs. Conway, in her sternest tones, "that you dare to look me in the face, much more to take the innocent name of my daughter upon your lips."

She stood in the lamplight, a little way from the culprit, a very righteous and upright figure, with all the narrowness in her words and manner of a North of Ireland woman whose belongings of past generations had been Presbyterians.

If Lady Florence's crime had been that she had turned to the East during the creed, it would have been just the same.

Lady Florence did not sit down, but she leaned against the chimney-board, and answered Mrs. Conway only by a shrug of her shoulders, and a raising of her eyebrows.

"You have come to live among us, breaking God's commandments, leading others astray by your life of dissipation and wickedness."

"I hope I haven't led you or Miss Conway astray," said Lady Florence politely. "And I don't think Nicholas and I are having a particularly dissipated time of it here, worse luck."

"You dare to mention to me the partner of your guilt! Why do I stay in this house a moment longer?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Lady Florence, still undisturbed. "It isn't in the least necessary that you should."

"Woman!" said Mrs. Conway, at which Lady Florence very unaffectedly burst out laughing, "I will pray for you. It is all I can do for one so hardened in wickedness."

"It is very kind of you, I am sure," said Lady Florence. "But I must say, you sound more like cursing than praying, just at present."

"For the last time I ask you, will you turn from your life of sin? Will you shake yourself free from the clutches of the devil?"

"You never asked me that before," said Lady Florence. "If anything was likely to move me, it would be seeing in your person how charming good people are; how kind, how gentle. Will you excuse me, Mrs. Conway? it is time for the baby to be put to bed."

At which Mrs. Conway fled, utterly routed, and Lady Florence accompanied her to the door, and sent her love to Joanna.

She was victorious, and she was undoubtedly equal to a contest with anybody in Ballylone, but oh, how dreary and miserable it all was—how tired she was of every thing and person about the Lodge, even, at times, of Nicholas himself!

Lady Florence was as unhappy as her worst enemy could have wished, and sometimes she felt as if death would be better than these endless days at Ballylone, when everybody else was in London.

She read in the papers of entertainments of all kinds, in which her name had once been prominent, and felt that her punishment was harder than she could bear.

But for the cruelty of Mr. Delacque, something might have been possible.

Certainly, Lady Florence felt herself a very hardly used woman.

CHAPTER XLV.

"Get money; still get money. . .
No matter by what means."

"MRS. CARROLL, how can you let that dirty child nurse the baby?" said Lady Florence sharply.

The eldest little Carroll was sitting on the kitchen door-step with the baby, in a great state of contentment, on her knee, and a couple more children crawling about her.

At another time, Lady Florence would probably have passed the group with a shrug, but she was feeling bored and cross, and was glad of an opportunity of blaming anybody.

"It is not easy to know who else would nurse the child, my lady," said Mrs. Carroll, having adopted this style of addressing her mistress under protest. "Sure Susan had to go down to the town for about a dozen things that your ladyship wanted, and it is telling me not to have a baby to care, when I have your dinner to make ready."

"I never said that Susan need go with those messages."

"And who else would go? It's not one of the childer I could send out in the dark."

Mrs. Carroll turned to the fire again, muttering something half to herself about "*that* unreasonable—no pleasing her."

"Well, if the child must nurse her, she might at least have a clean frock."

"And how long would she keep it clean when my back was turned? If you had as many as I have, my lady——"

"May the saints preserve me!" said Lady Florence fervently, shocking her hearer beyond words.

Then Nicholas, who had been out with Lady Florence and had lingered a little behind her, came in.

"Have you got a sixpence or a few coppers, Floss?" he said.

"That wretched O'Brien is up here begging again."

"He'll only take it to the public house, as you know, Nick," said Lady Florence, feeling in her pocket all the same.

"That he will, sir," said Mrs. Carroll, brightening up, as usual, in the presence of her favourite. "He was never more than a poor doited creature at the best, but since they turned him away at Cliff House and he can get no more ether, he is worse than ever."

"I must give him sixpence to get rid of him, anyhow," said Nicholas.

"It's Tuesday come eight days, he was up here," said Mrs. Carroll, changing the position of her pots, and taking a glance into the oven where the pudding was baking, "and he stood as it might be where you are, sir, and says he: 'My ma's gone away to the House, and it's till death's day I'll bless you if you have something for me'; and says I: 'If I have, sure you'll only drink it,' and says he: 'And if I do, wouldn't it be forgetting all my troubles I'd be?' It's ether that has been the curse of this country, sir, and now that there's a law to keep them from getting it, there's them like Richard O'Brien that can't thole to do without something."

"I shouldn't think it was nice to take," said Lady Florence, who had at last produced a sixpence.

"There's no two minds about that, my lady," said Mrs. Carroll, "but it comes cheaper than whiskey and acts quicker, and I've heard tell of the lovely dreams it gives you, and that it makes you happy no matter what is wrong."

"Here, Floss, are you going to give me that sixpence," said Nicholas.

"No," said Lady Florence suddenly. "Go and get ready for dinner. I shall speak to the man myself. I am rather curious to see an ether drinker."

"You must be very hard up for something to do," said Nicholas, laughing, but not a little astonished. It was very unlike Lady Florence to take an interest in a man like O'Brien.

Richard O'Brien was lounging against the wall, in the full light of the stable lamp. He had been loutish in his best days, the days when he had slouched about Cliff House, doing as little work as possible; now, with his rounded shoulders, his unwholesome face, his long, uncombed red hair, he looked half a savage.

"You are O'Brien, I suppose?" said Lady Florence, surveying him with disgust, and keeping as far away as possible. "Sir Nicholas has sent you out some money, but before I give it to you, I want to know how you will spend it."

"Sure, what would your ladyship know of the wants of the like of me—the heavens be your bed," said the man.

"They say indoors that you would spend it all in drink—is that true?" said Lady Florence. "I shall give it to you all the same, so you needn't be afraid to tell me. When you want food and clothes and—everything, would you still rather have drink?"

Richard O'Brien looked at her with some hesitation.

"And if I did," he said, "wouldn't the drink make me forget that I was cold or hungry? Wouldn't it be like food and drink to me at the one time?"

"And it would make you happy?" said Lady Florence, "Here, take this, and do what you like with it—they won't give you ether for it now?"

"And it's that I can't live without," said O'Brien. "And now it's only the quality—fine ladies, the like of you that doesn't want it, that can get it, and not a drop for the like of me, for love or money. And it's not the king upon his throne I would envy, if I had it. Long life to your ladyship! May all the blessings of Heaven rest on your head this day for the help you have given a poor man!"

Lady Florence turned slowly away to the house.

"It's not the king on his throne I would envy if I had it." "It makes you happy no matter what is wrong." "It's only fine ladies—the like of you that doesn't want it, that can get it."

The words kept on saying themselves in her head as she went upstairs to get ready for dinner.

Late that evening she made a last appeal to Nicholas to take her away. She stood before him, with her arms round his neck, and her head on his shoulder, and begged as she had never begged before.

"Let us go away—anywhere, anywhere, Nick! I can't bear it, the dulness is killing me. If you ever cared for me, if you have the least scrap of love in your heart for me now, take me away!"

Nicholas was not in a mood for sentiment at all. He was in the middle of an abstruse calculation as to whether it would

be better to sell the Witch at once, or to put her out to grass for the summer, and try to get a better price when the hunting season was near, and into this Lady Florence came, entreating, excited in a way for which there was no apparent reason.

"My dear Florence," he said, kindly enough, "I have told you a dozen times that I would be as glad to go away as you if there was any money to be had. Need I repeat for the fiftieth time that it is impossible?"

"But for my sake, Nick, darling, can't you manage it somehow? Can't you beg, borrow, or steal enough to take us away from here, no matter how poorly we may have to live somewhere else? Why should it cost any more to live abroad?"

"Because this is my house, and because we have no money to take us abroad. Look here, Floss, be a reasonable being. Who knows what may turn up some day?"

"For God's sake, Nick, take me away! You will be sorry for it some day if you won't listen to me. The life here is killing me—it is driving me mad—it—it——"

She broke into stormy sobs, and Nicholas suggested, rather impatiently, that she had better go to bed.

"Oh, you don't know what you are doing—you don't know what you are doing!" she cried, but she went, nevertheless.

Next day she wrote to Lady Hilda West, entreating her to help her, to take her away, even though it should mean a separation from Nicholas.

"At least," she said to herself characteristically, "I will give them every chance, so that I need not blame myself, whatever happens."

And she really did believe that she had shifted the responsibility of the future from her own shoulders.

But day after day passed without any answer from Lady Hilda, for the very good reason that she had gone off on a yachting expedition to Norway.

And so a whole month dragged away.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"Since all that I can ever do for thee
Is to do nothing, may'st thou never see,
Never divine: the all that nothing costeth me."

"Is it necessary to gallop invariably?" said Joanna reproachfully.

Young Kelly had caught sight of her in Ballylone Street, and had drawn up his horse with a suddenness which nearly brought horse and rider to the ground.

"I like to go at a good pace, I must say," he returned; "and besides, I was afraid I should not be in time to catch you before you turned up the short cut."

"But look how hot this poor thing is. Mr. Kelly, you ride like the traditional sailor. Was it absolutely vital that you should catch me before I turned up the short cut?"

"You ungrateful girl! I have taken all the trouble of riding into Ballylone to bring you an invitation, and in return you won't be decently civil."

"I only venture to disapprove of your riding like Jehu," said Joanna lightly.

"I thought it was driving he was celebrated for?"

"Well, I find just as much to object to there. Why, it is only a few days since you nearly drove over Polly and me with your tandem, and ended with the back of the dog-cart in McCracken's shop."

"And you told me I had better learn to drive one horse before I undertook two," said Marcus Kelly, laughing.

"That was rude, I admit," said Joanna, "but I was frightened."

Marcus Kelly had jumped off his horse, and they stood together in the middle of the street. Joanna liked him, and patronised and snubbed him as she pleased; he was so young, so ridiculously young; he made her feel like an old woman.

"Have you ever driven tandem, Miss Conway?" he said; "will you come with me some day?"

"Thank you; I had much rather not," said Joanna fervently.

She thought of her last tandem drive, with the Campbell twins, at Merevale, and how they had taken a short cut on the way, which had landed them in all sorts of difficulties. They had come to a descent like a precipice, and having survived this, they had reached a ford, which in consequence of some heavy rain had ceased to be one, and they had been obliged to turn back, arriving at their destination when everybody else was going away, to find Sir Nicholas distinctly jealous.

Joanna did not think she would like another tandem drive.

At that moment, as the two stood there in a sudden silence, Nicholas Osborne came directly round the corner by the post-office, facing them.

Though he had been at the Lodge for nearly six weeks, it was the first time Joanna had met him, and, as the time had gone by, it had begun to seem possible to her that they might live near each other for months without meeting, and the agitating necessity of going sometimes outside the gates of Cliff House became less agitating.

And now, here he came towards her, just as he might have

done long ago, with his hat at the angle she knew so well, and the old air of grandeur in his walk and manner.

He caught sight of the other two at the same moment, but it was too late to turn back, and it was impossible to pretend blindness.

Mr. Kelly looked a little embarrassed, and made an affected examination of his saddle girths. Nicholas hesitated for a moment, and then came on, flushing, and putting up his hand to twist his moustache, as he always did when he was embarrassed or annoyed.

Joanna bowed, and Nicholas raised his cap; Marcus Kelly said, "How are you, Osborne!" and he replied nothing; then he passed on, quickening his pace a little; they stood still, and it was all over.

"It was not so hard, after all," said Joanna to herself, with a white face. But her hands were trembling so that she could scarcely hold her umbrella.

"I had better give you my mother's note now; I must be off," said Mr. Kelly, who was still a little embarrassed. "It is to ask if any of you will come over for tennis next week. You will come, won't you?"

"Yes," said Joanna vaguely, "I should like it very much. Good-bye."

"Wait a minute; you are forgetting the note," said Mr. Kelly, and Joanna laughed and said she was very stupid.

But all the same, she put the note into her pocket, and forgot about it till next morning.

The meeting had not been so very terrible after all, and she need not be afraid of seeing Nicholas now. Nobody, she flattered herself—neither Marcus Kelly nor the curious inhabitants of Ballylone—could have noticed anything.

Only when she gave her mother Mrs. Kelly's note next day, she did not tell her that she had received it nearly twenty-four hours earlier.

Mrs. Conway accepted the invitation without demur. She was anxious about Joanna, who had been rather beyond her management and comprehension ever since Sir Nicholas' arrival at the Lodge. Something, even in the shape of frivolity, was desirable to occupy her mind, and the Kellys' frivolity was of an exceedingly sedate description, and, moreover, had the seal of the county upon it.

Mr. Conway, with his head full of the approaching Ulster Convention and the possibilities of Home Rule, had no opinion to give.

"Do whatever you like," he said. "We shall all be ruined in a year or so, so it doesn't much matter, and as for Joanna, it is very likely she hasn't seen her worst troubles yet."

So Joanna was told to write an acceptance, which she did

with rather too fervent expressions of satisfaction, and an interest in her clothes which was not entirely genuine.

All the same she liked to go ; she liked to wear good clothes, and she liked to drive on the outside car from McCracken's, which had seen better days. Joanna, having never had anything of her own better than a school-cart and a Shetland pony, was not too particular, and Roddy McCracken, who himself condescended to drive the car, always amused her. She had got on her best dress, a gray cloth which she had got in Derry before going to Merevale, and which was a little hot for the day ; but then it was impossible to have everything, and it did not look hot.

The Kellys' place was very different indeed from Merevale, which was Joanna's only other experience of county society.

To begin with, it was very, very much smaller, and the Kellys were not at all rich, though they were important people in the county.

Also, they were eminently respectable, and there were no doubtful people nor doubtful entertainments with them.

But the greatest difference which struck Joanna that afternoon was that they were excellent hosts.

When Lady Meredyth invited unimportant people to Merevale, she considered that her duty was completed, and that it was not at all incumbent upon her to have anything to say to them when they came ; but Mrs. Kelly and her daughters took as much trouble for Joanna, who was, as she told herself proudly, a nobody, as for anyone else who was there.

Even Mrs. Conway could not help being propitiated when Mr. Kelly himself, Marcus' elder brother, found a seat for her, and bestirred himself to be agreeable.

Joanna enjoyed herself ; she liked tennis, as she did most games, and though her chances of practising were few and far between, she found that she did not play worse than plenty of others. Marcus was her shadow, but his family were not at all anxious ; it was only Marcus' *way*—a way which had begun with his first knickerbockers, and lasted ever since, with an infinite variety in the objects of his admiration.

Joanna thought him a nice boy, but he bored her a little ; admiration for its own sake she did not much care about ; it was simply not in her line ; she had other things in her head, and, boy-like, Mr. Kelly contrived to make himself rather a bother by being simply ubiquitous, and having no refinements whatever in his determination to do as he wished.

It was just before tea, when she had managed to get rid of him for a few minutes, that the happiest time of the day came to her, to be succeeded only too quickly by the most miserable.

"Mrs. FitzHerbert wants to be introduced to you, Miss Conway," said one of the Kelly girls, and Joanna was taken

across the lawn, and introduced to a pretty, little old lady she had seen sometimes driving about in her carriage in Derry.

"I suppose this isn't the right time to talk business, Miss Conway," she said, "but I live so far on the other side of Derry that we have few chances of meeting. I have seen some of your carvings, and I want to ask you if you will undertake a small commission for me."

Would she undertake it! Joanna sat decorously still, but she could have risen and danced upon the lawn in joy. She had sold carvings before now, and parted from her work with mixed sorrow and satisfaction, but it was her first commission, and the difference was wide.

"If I can do it well enough," she said, "I shall be glad, and I thank you very much. I will do my very best."

"It is something for a wedding present that I want," said Mrs. FitzHerbert, "and it must be something that won't take you too much time or cost me too much money. We must arrange about the price on the most business principles. You take lessons from Mr. Tesser in Derry, don't you? Shall we refer it to him?"

Joanna was very nearly saying that she would be very glad to leave it all to Mrs. FitzHerbert herself, but she decided that this would be unbusiness-like, and above all things she wished to be business-like.

So she only said: "I daresay that will be best, but I can't expect much for my first commission. Thank you very much, indeed, Mrs. FitzHerbert, and of course if you don't like what I do, I will keep it."

Was there happiness before her after all? Not the same kind of happiness as she had once dreamt of, but a kind which was by no means to be despised. Was London becoming a real possibility, and a life which would be living? She was not good enough, she said to herself, to settle down contentedly in Ballylone, and live her life for other people. She could not efface herself, and give herself away to her family and the poor, though she had all along had an uncomfortable suspicion that this would have been the proper thing for her to do under the circumstances—the decorous, usual thing.

It is hard to say why this was the first time that Joanna really felt that one day things might once more be well with her—that there were other things in the world besides love and marriage—other ways of being happy.

She was at a disadvantage with other girls in this, that the mere joy of living had gone, and could never be replaced, but was it wholly a disadvantage? She would not have had that sweet glad year of her life effaced, not if by doing so all past and future pain could be driven away.

All the time another part of Joanna's mind was attending to her conversation with Mrs. FitzHerbert.

They talked about carving, and presently they discovered that there was another link of sympathy between them: Mrs. FitzHerbert kept bees; she found that Joanna was able to give her a good many hints, and she ended by asking the girl to come over and see her next time she came up to Derry for a carving lesson.

Then Sir Richard Sherbourne, an elderly gentleman Joanna knew slightly, came up and talked for a little, and brought them over a little tea-table, where they had a select party of three; Joanna enjoyed it very much.

Then, when he and Mrs. FitzHerbert began to talk about the election prospects, Joanna, being rather overwhelmed with that subject at home, and not liking, besides, to express her opinions, allowed herself to wander into a dream of London.

She was roused by a very familiar name.

"I suppose there is not much use in my writing to that young Osborne," Sir Richard Sherbourne was saying. "He can't have much influence or standing, but I conclude he will, at least, give us his vote?"

"You know all about him, I am sure," said Mrs. FitzHerbert.

"He's got himself into all sorts of trouble," Sir Richard said, shaking his head. "He is in debt to the very shop-keepers in the village, I believe, and they say he drinks."

Joanna put down her tea-cup rather noisily, but nobody noticed her.

"I never heard that," said Mrs. FitzHerbert. "What I heard was that *she* drinks, and I heard it as a fact, from a person who ought to know."

"Very likely that may be the way of it."

"I have seen for myself that he makes associates of the men in the village," said Mrs. FitzHerbert, "but I suppose he's very hard put to it for society. I am afraid he's a ne'er-do-well sort of young fellow at best, without the energy to go to the bad actively any more than he has the energy to do anything else."

Joanna sat still, with a burning face, trying to eat her plate of strawberries. What could she do? If her companions knew of her connection with Sir Nicholas, which in all probability they did, they had clearly forgotten it, and to get up and walk across the lawn alone was more than she had courage for; besides she wanted to know all about Nicholas—oh, how badly she wanted to know!

Only a few minutes ago she had been almost happy in the thought of what could be made of her own life, and now she heard this about him.

"There are several nasty stories about young Osborne," said Sir Richard; "but all the same I suppose he will be likely to go to Belfast as a delegate, and I will speak to him there if I get a chance. From all accounts Lady Florence Delacque is a handful for any man. But to live in a place like Ballylone with nothing to do is very bad for any young fellow."

"When he first came over——" Mrs. FitzHerbert began, and then she all at once remembered Joanna and came to a dead pause.

"Oh, good Heavens!" she said, and then added very hastily, "how is Lady Sherbourne?"

At which Sir Richard was a little astonished, as Mrs. FitzHerbert had met his wife in excellent health in the earlier part of the afternoon.

But there was no more brightness that day for Joanna, no more pleasure, nothing but a longing to get home.

She thought of Mr. Kestrell at Merevale, and remembered the pity she had felt for that insipid young man, in the disgrace of his wife. And now, if this same misery came to Nicholas, if Lady Florence drank, how could Joanna dream of being happy herself?

What was Nicholas making of his life? Nicholas, for whom she had had such hopes and plans, of whom she knew she could have made something.

Was he every day to sink a little and a little lower in her very sight?

And not the sacrifice of her life or of all that made life most worth living, could do him any good.

CHAPTER XLVII.

"To-morrow we meet the same then, dearest?
May I take your hand in mine?
Mere friends are we—well, friends the merest
Keep much that I'll resign.

Yet I will but say what mere friends say,
Or only a thought stronger;
I will hold your hand but so long as all may,
Or so very little longer——"

BALLYLONE broke out into gaiety in the beginning of June.

Everybody began to give tennis parties, at which of course the same people were always to be met, and Joanna went everywhere she was asked, just for something to fill up the afternoons, while the mornings and evenings were given to carving.

The Conways themselves had a strawberry party in the meadow by the river, for which Mrs. Morris made a rapid and transient recovery.

But the greatest excitement of all was a Gymkhana given by a neighbouring militia, to which Joanna went with Mrs. Chester, as Edith was somewhere in the south and Mrs. Conway would not go.

Nobody in Ballylone knew exactly what a Gymkhana was, and while some decided that it was a name which the Rifles had seen fit to bestow upon their camp, others looked upon the word as an unsolvable mystery, and among these was Mrs. Conway, who was afraid to go lest she should be betrayed into some new and strange dissipation of which she could not approve.

Mrs. Chester said she must at least go and find out what she was asked to, and that curiosity alone would bring her.

Joanna said to herself that she was quite sure Sir Nicholas would not be there, or she would have stayed at home; he had not been to any of the other entertainments, and why should he go to this? Lady Florence would not be asked, and he could not go without her.

But all the same, she mentioned to nobody that they had once got up an impromptu Gymkhana at Merevale, and that she knew that it had to do with the games on horseback and horseraces.

They had not been two minutes at the camp, they had not even taken their places by the racecourse, before she saw him, long before Mrs. Chester had any idea he was there.

He was standing in a group of men, with a long coat over his racing kit, inspecting the spears which had been prepared for tent-pecking.

Nicholas was not in the best of tempers. His invitation to the Rifles had not included Lady Florence, and having been seen by her, had roused her to an angry protest that he should not go.

He had said, "Very well," and had made his own arrangements without further remark. Nothing was worth having a row over, but he had every intention of going, and as several of the competitions were open, he amused himself during the intervening days in giving Benedict a little practice.

But at the very last minute Lady Florence had discovered that he was going, and had made a scene, to his extreme annoyance. He had not given in, but he was worried and vexed.

But he rode away his vexation. He was perfectly happy; he loved to feel Benedict quivering with excitement under him; there was no fear that either his patience or his courage would give way, when again and again the young horse

refused to be brought into line ; and yet there was no swagger about Nicholas' riding, no attempt to show off.

He did not win the race ; half mad with excitement and the galloping of the other horses, Benedict swerved at the second fence and bolted, and by the time Nicholas got him back to the course the race was over.

The runaway had created a little excitement and alarm among the spectators, but Joanna had proudly refused to be alarmed.

Somebody beside her said : "Oh, he will be killed !" and she smiled to herself with perfect faith in Nicholas on horseback.

Later on Benedict redeemed his character over tent-pegging and tilting at the ring, and then came tea in one of the tents.

Here the ubiquitous Mr. Kelly made his appearance. He had distinguished himself in tent-pegging by overbalancing himself and falling off on his head, but neither his head or his feelings seemed much the worse.

But, as a matter of course, he had to escort Mrs. Chester, and Joanna was free to follow at her own sweet will, a few steps behind.

And then a strange thing happened.

As they walked up to the tea tents they met Nicholas Osborne, who had been to change into his ordinary clothes. He hardly knew what impulse seized him not to pass with a bow, or whether the impulse was only his ; he was excited with his riding, ruffled with Lady Florence, and suddenly found himself admiring Joanna in her white dress.

He paused, hesitated, without holding out his hand, and said : "Will you let me take you for some tea ?"

Nicholas did not often expose himself to a possible snub.

All in a minute, Joanna had to make up her mind how to treat her old lover.

"Thanks," she said, in a low voice, and she went with him in silence, absolutely unaware that he had not followed Mrs. Chester and young Kelly, but had taken her to the opposite tent.

There was only one idea in her head at the moment, and an idea which was absurdly disproportioned to the occasion ; it was a hope, a prayer to herself, that he would not call her Miss Conway, for that she felt she could not bear.

Neither of them said anything till he had brought her her tea, which might as well have been vinegar, for all Joanna knew about it.

He asked her if she would have sponge cake or currant, and found her a comfortable seat in a corner, and she felt the old delightful excitement of existence coming back, and began to think there might be pleasures in friendship.

Nicholas had a whiskey and soda himself before he came to sit down beside her. They were in a corner a little way from everybody else, and indeed, most of the guests had gone to the other tent.

"Joanna," he said, "it is very good of you to speak to me. I *couldn't* pass you as a stranger; again it was too unbearable that day in Ballylone."

Joanna gave a long sigh. Other people had been sorry for her, but nobody had understood—there had been nobody who had felt *with* her all that long year. The old habit of feeling sure that whatever worried her, Nicholas would know and understand, was coming back very strongly. It was so hard to realise the difference.

"You are the only girl in the world who would be so sweet and so noble," said Nicholas, still very low. "My wicked madness has brought me misery enough, but I deserve it. It would be all right, if I was the only one to suffer. Joanna, I daren't hope for your friendship or forgiveness."

"Nicholas," said Joanna, "you know I forgive you."

"I know you are the dearest, purest, sweetest girl in all the world!" said Nicholas passionately. "Joanna, I know how to value you now that it is too late. Yes, I know I mustn't speak like this again, dear, and I won't. Let us talk about something else."

They did; they even laughed and discussed the people round them, and Joanna, at least, began madly to dream of friendship. It was such a relief—a relief that Nicholas could not know—to feel that she could say what she liked, that she need have no difficulties, no reserves.

And to do him justice, he did not misunderstand her.

When he asked her to go for a stroll with him a little later, she did hesitate, but even then it was only for a moment.

"Won't you come as a friend?" he said. "I want to tell you all about myself, and I will be very careful, dear."

Joanna went. Might not her friendship with him be a possible means of making something of his life?

"Have I changed?" said Nicholas.

"No, not much," Joanna answered.

"You have, but I don't exactly know how. You are different—you are older, I think," said Nicholas, and then there was a pause, which both understood.

"Has your hair grown, dear?" said he, and from his tone he might as well have said "darling." Perhaps Joanna felt this, for she drew away from him a little, as she thought of that day in Merevale, when he had come to see her in her room.

"I don't know," she said; "I daresay it has."

"You look as sweet and pure as ever," said Nicholas, "and

as for me, I have been going headlong to the devil, ever since I lost you, through my own fault."

"Oh, I am sorry," said she softly.

"Nicholas," she said, a little later, "you are not going to make me more miserable, are you? If you think you have helped to spoil my life a little, if you feel you owe me anything, won't you make up to me by keeping straight, and being a good man, that I can feel proud of as my friend?"

"I would do anything for you," said Nicholas. "But you don't know how hard it is. I have not a sweet girl like you to help me. Don't worry about me, little girl; I have made a mess of my life all through."

"But won't you try and make something of it now, for the sake of old times," said Joanna; "for—for—Lady Florence's sake——"

"Don't!" said Nicholas roughly.

But he was never ungenerous in the matter of promises, and just then he really felt what he said.

Afterwards they talked about all sorts of things and people, about Merevale, about Ballylone, sometimes checking themselves with a sense of approaching forbidden ground.

These were eloquent silences, which they both understood—pauses when words were absolutely unnecessary.

When Joanna came back to Mrs. Chester at last, she felt that friendship was indeed a thing to be prized, and that she might still be of some use to Nicholas. She was so excited that she scarcely knew what she was doing, and with glowing cheeks and shining eyes, for once she looked really pretty; and she flattered herself that she looked just as usual.

She did not notice young Kelly's embarrassment, or Mrs. Chester's stony silence; she noticed nothing till they were once more in the phaeton driving home, and there Mrs. Chester expressed herself.

"Joanna," she said, "I am surprised; I am very much surprised! Get on!" to the pony, who had taken advantage of his mistress' abstraction to stop. Mrs. Chester drove with both arms and with her body too, so it was seldom she tried to do anything else at the same time.

Miss Chester was irreverently fond of adapting an old story to her mother, about a Frenchman who had requested his friend not to speak to him, as he was "busy riding."

Mrs. Chester was very busy driving, but all the same she was too excited and indignant to restrain herself.

"I thought you were a steady girl, Joanna; I thought I might trust you; I thought you were the last girl to wander off in the woods all afternoon with a man who treated you like that scoundrel——"

"How dare you!" cried Joanna.

"Sit quiet this moment; you will frighten the pony," said Mrs. Chester. "Joanna, such behaviour is neither ladylike nor womanly, and is certainly lowering yourself very much. Of course, Sir Nicholas simply thinks that you are doing your best to catch him again, even now. Oh, dear, I see what is the matter with the pony—I have been pulling the wrong rein."

Mrs. Chester was so kindly and good-natured in general that her words hurt Joanna very much.

"You don't understand," she said. "He understands."

"I am afraid he understands only too well," said Mrs. Chester. "What is that coming up rattling up behind. Do shout for them to stop; it is sure to frighten the pony."

But just then Joanna would not have cared much if the sedate little pony had seen fit to end everything in this world for her.

Who was right—what was right?

Nicholas, when he thanked her for her friendship and said it was his one hope of salvation, or Mrs. Chester, when she said these cruel things?

CHAPTER XLVIII.

" . . . Vous connaîtrez un jour
Le tort que vous vous faites ;
Le mépris suit de près l'amour
Qu'inspirent les coquettes.
Cherchez à vous faire estimer
Plus qu'à vous rendre aimable ;
Le faux honneur de tout charmer
Détruit le véritable."

"I HOPE you had a pleasant afternoon," said Lady Florence. "Will you have another cup of tea?"

"Half a cup, please, if it is good still; you know I don't like hot water. Floss, is the kid safe there? Won't it bang its head against the fender if it rolls?"

"Oh, it's all right. The rug is a capital place for it. I can't manage my breakfast with the little wretch on my knee," said Lady Florence, with a glance at her offspring.

They were having their usual eleven-o'clock breakfast on the day after the militia Gymkhana, and Nicholas was just beginning to think that he was going to escape scot-free.

The last month had changed Lady Florence a good deal: she had lost her pretty colour and she had become irritable; the terms upon which she and Nicholas were, were not of the best; they quarrelled and were reconciled a dozen times a day; quarrels which Nicholas hated, which he was ready to

do anything to avoid, short of giving up his particular fad for the moment.

"I hope you had a pleasant afternoon, yesterday," repeated Lady Florence.

"Yes, thanks. Would you mind passing me an egg?" said Nicholas, in a most apologetic tone.

"I had a very pleasant afternoon, too, all alone."

"There, Floss, drop it, and forgive me like a good girl."

"Oh, I don't mind in the least—not in the very least. You shall do as you like, and I shall do as I like," said Lady Florence.

Nicholas got up from his chair, and walked up to her with a very grave face. It was in his mind to say to her that he was sorry, to say that he would try to be different, that for his part he would be glad to make an effort to draw their lives closer together. He felt that she had more to forgive him than she knew, and the influence of Joanna was still strong upon him.

But when he laid his hand upon her shoulder and stooped over her, he suddenly drew back with a very different expression.

"That stuff again," he said with disgust. "I know the room reeks with it, but I was in hopes it was from yesterday."

"Well, it is not my fault," said Lady Florence sharply. "I have not been accustomed to live like this without a comfort or a soul to speak to all day long. You go away and leave me to myself from morning till night, and then you are surprised that I am glad to take any way of making the time pass."

Then she suddenly broke out passionately: "You don't know what it is, Nick, to count minute after minute and think that the day will never pass, and feel that every other day will be the same. And to know that other people—all the people I used to know—are enjoying themselves, as I might be enjoying myself but for you. Oh, sometimes I feel as if I should go mad!"

"We have made an awful mess of it," said Nicholas, with a sigh.

"It is all your fault," said Lady Florence, with excitement.

"All! As long as you can manage to make the time pass, what do you care about me?"

"Well, look here, Florence, let bygones be bygones," said Nicholas. "Go up to your room and lie down for a bit till you are quite yourself, and then, when you come down, we will do what you like for the rest of the day. I am sorry I left you alone, dear."

"That might do if I didn't know you quite so well, Nick.

As far as promises go, you are the most generous man in the world. No, I am going out, for my own amusement, this morning, and as you have finished your breakfast, I am going at once."

"You are not," said Nicholas; and as she got up, he took a few hasty steps and placed himself in front of the door.

"This is very amusing," said Lady Florence. "Are you going to keep me as a prisoner to-day?"

"Listen to me, Floss," said Nicholas calmly. "You are not quite yourself, and there is no reason why you should want to go out just now. Wait for a few hours, and you shall do as you like. This sort of thing is neither more nor less than vulgar."

"Are you going to let me pass?"

"Not at present. Sit down and think it over for a bit; you and I might have an expedition to Derry in the afternoon."

"That would be exciting! Nick, I am not a child, and I choose to do as I wish."

"I am not going to argue about the matter any more," said he shortly.

Whereupon, without another word, he walked out of the room and locked the door after him.

Then he went to the office and lighted a pipe.

He would at least keep his shame to himself as long as he could, but how long would that be? Must not Mrs. Carroll, at least, have recognised something strange about Lady Florence weeks ago; must not the smell of ether be too familiar to her for possible mistake?

Would she not think it very odd to find the dining-room door locked upon her mistress, a discovery which she might make at any minute?

Nicholas was in a very black mood this morning, and it seemed to him that everything and everybody in the world were against him.

He edged his chair impatiently out of the sunshine, which found its way through the window in spite of the little trees outside.

The very darkest corner of the room seemed most appropriate to-day.

He was vexed and angry with himself, and in one of those moods when he seemed to himself a very scoundrel. It was the revulsion from his high spirits of yesterday, when he had been inclined to consider himself a very fine fellow indeed. As long as they remained at the Lodge, matters could only go on getting worse with Lady Florence and himself.

And yet he owed money to everybody in Ballylone, though only small sums, it was true. He had not paid Carroll any-

thing for some time, and he had a pretty long tailor's bill on his hands.

There were some little things unpaid in Derry ever since his last visit, and on his table, even now, lay the bill for some of his presents to Joanna in the days of their engagement, presents which had long ago been sold once more.

Some time or other, he supposed, all these people would want to be paid. The "Witch" must go, perhaps, but Benedict he could not part with.

And then there was Joanna—Joanna, who he felt he loved, now she was unattainable, twice as much as he had ever loved her before; Joanna, who would probably marry that young Kelly, and forget all about Nicholas and be happy. Why had he been such a fool as to throw away his chance of happiness? Would not the very best thing for him be to end his life, which was of no use to himself or anyone else? Nicholas amused himself with pictures of his death, and what everybody would say. Joanna would not forget him then—even Lady Florence would regret having made him so miserable. It would be a dramatic and pleasing end to everything. But in his secret heart he knew very well indeed that he had not the smallest intention of killing himself; he did not even wish to, and, had he wished it, he knew he had not the courage.

As he pictured the consternation and dismay of his friends and enemies, there came a tap at the open window, and he looked round to see Lady Florence, free and unabashed.

"I called in to say good-bye for the present, Nick," she said triumphantly. "You forgot that the dining-room windows were not very far from the ground, my friend."

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders disgustedly.

"You had better see to the baby, unless, indeed, you are still determined to keep me by force, in which case I have a good start," said Lady Florence.

"I am certainly not going to run down the avenue after you," said Nicholas coldly. "Had you not better get a hat? I shall not interfere with you any more."

Not even in his pipe was there any consolation now. But presently he bethought himself that it might indeed be well that he should unlock the dining-room door, and give the baby to Mrs. Carroll. It was lying contentedly on the rug, quite wide awake, a little creature that seemed to have realised already that there would not be much trouble taken for its entertainment in this world.

Nicholas stood looking down upon it, feeling that here, too, was somebody that would be better out of the way: that was wanted by no one.

Then the baby held up its arms to him, and smiled in his face.

Nicholas had never taken any interest whatever in his child, but now that they two were all alone, he suddenly knelt down on the rug beside it, and let it seize his finger between its two soft, uncertain little hands. It was not afraid of him in the least, and yet how easily, he thought, how very easily, he could end the little thing's life for it, and perhaps it might be the greatest kindness he could do to it.

What was to become of the child when it should grow to be a woman, a woman without a name or a place in the world? Was not his wrong toward this baby greater than his wrong toward Joanna or toward Florence?

"What a jolly little kid it is!" he said to himself regretfully, as the baby made an effort to carry his finger to its mouth, and gave a small gurgle of laughter.

Then he heard Mrs. Carroll's foot in the passage, and sprang to his feet, flushing hotly.

"Lady Florence has gone out, Mrs. Carroll," he said. "Can you take the baby?"

And then he escaped, to avoid hearing her objections to having the child on her hands at that hour of the day, when she was particularly busy, and all the children were at school.

Nicholas almost thought that he would have liked to keep the child in the room with him, but he would not for worlds have admitted this to Mrs. Carroll.

But when Lady Florence returned in time for lunch, she was very much surprised by his first words, which were: "Florence, shouldn't the child be vaccinated, and christened, and all that sort of thing?"

Lady Florence was entirely herself again now, consequently by no means completely pleased with her expedition to the village, and all the more resolved to brazen it out.

"Well, that is easily arranged," she said. "I might have spoken to Mr. Jellett this morning if I had thought of it. I walked all the way from Ballylone with him!"

"Did you?" said Nicholas. "You have got your dress rather muddy."

"It was great fun," said Lady Florence. "Mr. Jellett was so nervous, knowing that he was under the eyes of all his disapproving parishioners. At last I said: 'Don't look so uncomfortable, Mr. Jellett; I assure you, you are not compromising me in the least. Nick never objects to clergymen,' and the little silly hadn't a word to say in reply."

"I don't think it particularly funny," said Nicholas gravely.

"I daresay Mr. Jellett won't think it at all funny before he has heard the last of it," said Lady Florence. "I am the only one with a sense of humour."

"But, I suppose, he can't refuse to christen the kid," said Nicholas, half to himself.

"If you turn out a fond parent on my hands, that will be the funniest thing of all!" said Lady Florence, staring at him.

CHAPTER XLIX.

"Dreamer of dreams born out of time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight."

"WHY, Joanna, working away still? I heard you had left at half-past three."

"I am glad to see you back again, Edith. I generally leave then, but this head is so fearfully difficult, I wanted to stay till I made the ear right, and Mr. Tesser said I could. Had you a good time in the South?"

"A capital time," said Miss Chester. "There were two militias out and lots of men."

"That must have been Paradise!" said Joanna with a laugh.

"Very nice men they were too," said Miss Chester. "There was a Captain Everett, but I must tell you about him later on, and show you his photograph. What a pretty head you are carving, Joanna!" she added, with a decided decrease of interest in her tone.

"It is excruciatingly difficult," said Joanna. "I suppose I must stop," with a few lingering touches, "the time does *fly* when I am struggling over this thing. Are you coming home with me, Edith?"

"No, but I want you to come to the big polo match with me. It is Belfast against this county, and ought to be awfully exciting."

"My *dear* Edith! I said I would be home for afternoon tea——"

"But you know you are beginning to break free a little, now," interposed Miss Chester hastily.

"And look at my clothes——"

"Why, you have got your best dress on, under that apron, and have I not just heard this moment at McAfee's that your new hat is finished? It was that put the idea into my head of asking you to come, for I am sure you will never have as good a chance of showing it off. Now don't tell me that two girls can't go alone to the field, for that is nonsense; besides, when we arrive we can ask somebody to chaperon us, if you are very particular. Pack away those things and come along like good girl."

Joanna meditated. She wanted to go to that polo match very much; she had wanted to go ever since last week, when

she had known that Nicholas was to play in it, and she had been thankful that there was no chance of having her wishes fulfilled. But was it some vague hope which had made her put on her best dress that day? She did long so much to see Nicholas ride once more, perhaps to speak to him, in a place where every word and look was not so sure to be noticed and commented upon, as at Ballylone festivities.

The temptation was too great.

"Well, Edith, I will go," she said.

"I thought you were getting sporting!" said Miss Chester, highly delighted. "It looked hopeful to hear that you had got into trouble with the mother. Are you no better than the rest of us after all, my particular Joanna?"

"If you go on like that, I shall most undoubtedly stay at home," returned Joanna shortly.

"Very well, I won't say another word. You ought to see Captain Everett ride! I wish he was here."

"Your geese are all swans, Edith," said Joanna, as she took off her apron.

And then they went to McAfee's to get her new hat, which, Miss Chester declared, suited her to perfection, though she would hardly allow her time to put it on.

Joanna was unusually fidgety about her appearance, though if she had known it, excitement and an unreasonable sort of happiness were the most becoming things of all.

There were a good many people on the polo ground; all Derry had turned up, and a few stray people had accompanied their champions from Belfast.

Nicholas' ponies were of course not his own; he had been mounted for the occasion, and was at a slight disadvantage in consequence, which was more than made up for by his superior practice and science. He had played in his day with the very best polo players in England or elsewhere, with men whose sole idea of play did not lie in managing to "get a hit at the ball," as he had said to Joanna once.

Lady Florence was there too, in the daintiest of dresses, after a sharp tussle with Nicholas, in which she had proved victorious.

She was the centre of a group of men, standing near the refreshment table, laughing and talking loudly, and trying to forget that her presence there was already coming home to her as a mistake.

She had bowed to Lady Evesham, the only woman present she knew, and she had received in return a cut direct, a cut before everybody, and visible to everybody; and now she felt herself as something apart from the rest, and could not be content even with the men who surrounded her, who were dull, familiar, and not such as she had been accustomed to meet.

But she only laughed and talked the more, and did not decline the champagne they offered her.

The attention of all the ladies on the ground was distracted from the match. They looked at her and discussed matters among themselves.

"How does the creature dare to come here?" said somebody.

"She is painted up to her eyes, I can see that plainly," said somebody else, which was absolutely unfounded on fact.

"She is drinking too much, what is more. That horrid young Loder is filling her glass again and again."

"What a disgraceful sight!"

"Joanna," said Miss Chester, "will you come and walk past Lady Florence slowly? I want to see her close."

"I will not—I will not!" cried Joanna. "How can you—how can they all—look at the wretched woman as a sight—a spectacle? I will not walk past to stare at her."

"Oh, all right; only you might say it in fewer words. There, that quarter is over."

But Joanna would not look up; she was afraid to face the shame in Nicholas' eyes. She was so sorry for him, so very, very sorry.

He did not come up to speak to her. He walked over to the refreshment table, had a glass of something, and apparently spoke a few words to Lady Florence. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and went back to mount again.

As he rode out past Joanna their eyes met for one moment.

She was full of a hot indignation against the men who were round Lady Florence, amusing themselves with her disgrace. All her interest in the game was gone, and she would have given worlds for courage to go up to Lady Florence herself. But what good could she do?

By the time the next quarter was over, the men round Lady Florence had thinned a good deal; such amusement might be carried a little too far, they recognised, and went to detail amusing things she had said among the crowd.

This time Nicholas gave his pony to a groom, and walked straight up to Joanna, hot and dirty as he was.

He gave her no greeting at all. He only said in a low voice: "My God, this is awful—what can I do?"

"Can I do anything?" said Joanna.

"If you could get her to go home—but no, I shouldn't mix you up in such a thing."

"I will try," said Joanna.

"There will be two more quarters, and I must stay," said Nicholas.

He knew very well that he had no right to draw Joanna into his concerns, even as he spoke.

"I shouldn't let you have anything to say to it," he said.

"I believe she would go readily enough if she had an excuse. No, Joanna, I won't let you do it."

"I shall manage it, dear, trust me," said Joanna quietly.

Courage to face two or three unknown young men?—she had courage to face a regiment now, and with all the misery of it she could not control an immense happiness; Nicholas had trusted her unhesitatingly; he had known that he might depend upon her to do all she could. She was absolutely grateful to him.

She did not ask Miss Chester to go with her. She knew that it would have been of no use, and, besides, she felt she had no right to drag her into the matter. She did not stop to think what everybody there would say and imagine about her; she walked steadily over to Lady Florence, considering only how she could best gain her purpose.

Lady Florence was glad to see her, very glad. She was not too much excited to recognise her position, and the support there was in this girl, of whom she thought so little.

"Lady Florence," said Joanna, weighing every word, "the best of the match is over, and I promised to be at home early. Sir Nicholas said that perhaps you would see me home, as my people do not like me to go alone."

Lady Florence hesitated; even the few remaining men had more or less melted away, and if Joanna left her, there was every chance of her finding herself alone.

"You are in a great hurry," she said, in a voice which was slightly unsteady. "Why should we go before all the rest?"

"I must go now," said Joanna.

"Well, then, I suppose I must be good-natured," said Lady Florence. "I don't know that I care much to stay, after all."

She understood perfectly well all the time that it was for her sake, not Joanna's, that they were to go, but not even to herself would she admit it.

She walked slowly, very slowly, past the curious crowd, talking to Joanna of Lady Hilda, of Merevale, with defiant gaiety. None of them should think they had driven her away.

But the general interest was largely transferred from her to her companion.

As they passed Miss Chester, she sprang forward and caught Joanna's arm, with a face of dismay.

"What is the meaning of this, Joanna?" she said. "Do you want to have yourself talked about all over the county?"

"I can't help it," said Joanna, and she passed on.

At Merevale she had been rather afraid of Lady Florence, but now she was not afraid of her at all, not even when they reached the station and her charge grumbled not a little to find they had an hour to wait for the train.

Lady Florence had been very much excited at first, but she soon calmed down and fell asleep on the waiting-room sofa.

Joanna got a seat just outside, and sat there very quietly, and without any impatience. The exaltation, the joy of having been able to do something for Nicholas, of having been appealed to unhesitatingly by him, was too recent to leave room for any other feelings. Just then she did not care in the least what people said or thought of her.

Nicholas and Miss Chester were both in time for the train.

He did not say anything to thank Joanna; indeed the only words that passed between them were hers, when she told him where Lady Florence was.

She and Miss Chester were travelling second class, and they saw no more of the other two till they reached Ballylone.

There were plenty of other people in the carriage, and all Miss Chester had a chance of saying was: "You are a quixotic little fool," which annoyed Joanna exceedingly.

She was rather proud of her common sense, and she knew she was not quixotic—except where Nicholas was concerned.

She did not want to walk with Miss Chester, and she did not want to see Nicholas and Lady Florence again, so she hung back, and waited till everybody else had left the station.

But she came out to find Nicholas waiting for her.

"The dog-cart had come to meet us," he said, "so I sent her up. I couldn't go myself, without saying to you how very, very grateful I am."

His words came very fast, and he stammered and pulled at his moustache, but it did not seem to occur to him that he could have shown his gratitude better by giving no further opportunity for gossip about this girl he had already injured so much.

Joanna knew very well that it would have been better for her to have walked home alone, but how could she hurt him more on this day when he had had so much to hurt him, when he so evidently wanted comfort?

Nicholas was very much excited.

"Joanna," he said, "I can't stand it any longer. My life is like hell. It is not the first, nor the second time that *that* has happened."

"You must go away," said Joanna very gravely. "To me that seems the only thing to be done."

"Go away! Joanna, you know I would not have come here if I could have helped it, but now I can't go away. Tell me, when a woman acts like that, don't you think she cuts all bonds of honour? You know there are no legal bonds between us. Darling, is it possible you could forgive me?"

They were in the "loanan" now, going up the short cut

with slackening steps, and at his hasty words Joanna came to a full stop.

"Dear Nicholas," she said, "I must speak out to you for once. If there was nothing to separate us, and there *is*, much—nothing could ever be the same as it once was—nothing could ever be the same again."

"But it could——" Nicholas cried, eagerly catching her hand. "Only that I should love you more—more than ever before."

"Oh, I don't want to vex you," said Joanna, "or to hurt you. But dear, there is this between us at least—loss of trust. I could never trust you again, not if I spent my whole life in trying to learn."

"You are very cruel," said Nicholas, with his voice full of pain.

"Oh, Nicholas, I can't *bear* to hurt you!" said Joanna.

"Don't you love me any longer?"

"I do love you, I do love you, dear, but what I have said had to be said once; we will never speak of it again. I want you to be brave, Nicholas, and to face life."

And to herself she was saying: "Oh, I wish I could bear it for him." She knew well she was the stronger of the two.

"And yet, you won't give me the only help you can," said he reproachfully.

"You must help yourself," said Joanna. "Nicholas, I can't bear you to be content to settle down here, and scrape along for the rest of your life doing nothing. It is not like a man; it is like a coward to be beaten so easily!"

"You may say what you like to me, of course," said Nicholas, "but you don't understand the difficulties."

"I would conquer them, at any rate," said Joanna. "You know, Nicholas, that it is only to you I would allow that you are not perfect. You aren't vexed with me for speaking out plainly?"

"I am thankful—I am grateful," said Nicholas, but he was a little annoyed all the same.

"Then if I was free, it would be no use?" he said.

"You are not free," said Joanna. "Nicholas, I see we can't hope to meet as friends yet; we can't feel that things are not as they were between us."

"Oh, don't say that; I can! I promise I will."

"At least I cannot," said Joanna sadly. "Nicholas, I *know* that it has been wrong for me to let you speak to me as you have spoken to-day, but I can't *feel* it, and so we must say good-bye."

At the end of the lane they parted in silence.

CHAPTER L.

"Yet this turns now to a fault—there ! there !
That I do love, watch too long,
And wait too well, and weary and wear ;
And 'tis all an old story, and my despair
Fit subject for some new song."

THE blow which Joanna had been expecting, ever since the polo match, fell on the evening of the next day.

She was giving Polly her drawing lesson, when the servant came to say that her father wanted to speak to her in the dining-room.

She lingered over the little girl for a minute.

"Give me a good kiss, dear," she said wistfully, and Polly, who had had an instinct all day that something was wrong, flung her arms round Joanna's neck, and hugged her closely.

Then Joanna walked slowly out of the room.

Both her father and mother were in the dining-room, but Mrs. Conway got up and walked towards the door as she came in. Joanna had often seen her mother angry, but she had never seen her face drawn and white with passion as now.

"Joanna," she said, and her words came with difficulty, "for myself, I cannot speak to you. I am sorry you are my daughter. I leave you to your father. I never thought you would bring disgrace upon your family."

Her words came in short, abrupt sentences, but when Joanna would have spoken she waved her hand for silence.

"Not a word!" she said. "Not a word in my presence!"

But it was with an immense relief that Joanna found herself left with her father.

He said nothing till his wife had left the room; he stood silently by the window with bent head, and a look of utter depression which cut her to the heart.

"I don't know what to say to you," he said, with a heavy sigh. "When a girl has acted as you have done, there is very little use in speaking to her. The only possible defence you could make would be to deny the whole thing."

"Will you tell me what you have heard?" said Joanna. As a rule the excessive anger of her family made her think less instead of more of any wrong she had done, but in this case she was not sure of her position. Everybody seemed to be against her. Was her point of view totally wrong?

"I have heard this: that on the day of that militia affair, you spent the afternoon in the woods with Sir Nicholas Osborne; that yesterday, instead of coming home after your

carving class, you went to meet him at the polo field in Derry; and came home with him, and, besides that, God knows how often you may have met him, or whether you ever have been to the carving class at all——”

“Father!” cried Joanna.

“Well, can you wonder that I can’t trust you now? I who never for one instant doubted you before.”

“Father,” said Joanna, “it is not all true, but it is so hard to make it clear. I did not go to the polo match yesterday to meet him, and I have only seen him twice——”

“What is the good of distinguishing the particular shades of your shame?” said Mr. Conway passionately. “It is enough for me that you have spoken to a man you ought not to allow to approach you, much less to speak to you. Have you no pride or self-respect?”

Then, with all her reserve, Joanna for once spoke out, helped by a sudden anger at his words.

“Father,” she said, “will you listen to me? When Nicholas first asked me to marry him I did not care very much. I was just a child, and it amused me and flattered me. I thought I should like to be married before the other girls at school!” she said, with a hard little laugh. “But then, little by little it became different. We were together every day, and I was to be his wife and everything I did and thought and cared for was for him. There was never a minute of the day that I did not think of him, and there wasn’t a thought or a hope or a prayer without his name. He came in my heart before God in heaven, and I never even dreamt of the possibility of life without him!”

Joanna’s desperate earnestness and passion silenced her father.

She went on with hardly a pause.

“Then all at once—all in a minute, what had been right before became wrong. All at once Nicholas was to be nothing to me. It was improper and wrong for me to think or care. Well, it had to be borne, and I did my best, didn’t I, father? I did try to be the same as before.”

Mr. Conway was touched in spite of himself, and his face softened.

“You ask, have I no pride, but it nearly killed me to think that everybody knew, and I tried always to make them think that I did not care, and I believe sometimes even you thought so, father. At first it was not so bad, but it was later on, when you thought I was getting over it, that it was worst. It seemed as if I couldn’t bear to go on living, and—oh, father, this is worst of all—my heart is breaking!”

Joanna all at once turned so very white that Mr. Conway instinctively put out his hand to steady her. She was

not in the habit of fainting or ailing in any way, and he was frightened.

He put her in a chair, and got her a glass of water, and the colour came back to her face very quickly, but he could not speak to her again with the same hardness.

"But everything you have told me," he said, "only makes it more certain that you ought not to have spoken to him."

"He has nobody else," said Joanna, in a low voice. "I thought we could be friends. Whatever happens, he is like no other man to me, and it is only a year since he was everything. I was so sorry for him, and I thought perhaps I could help him——"

"Help him! how could you help him? And as for friendship—rubbish!"

"Yes," said Joanna, "I found that was a mistake. But, father, could I turn away, when I thought a word would perhaps help him?"

"Nonsense! how could a word from you help him? He deserves nothing but contempt at your hands. You should have left him to his Lady Florence, for whom he threw you over. No, Joanna, I am very sorry for you, but you have acted very wrongly and foolishly, and you may be sure you have lowered yourself in his mind, too. And as for your mother——!"

Words failed him to express Mrs. Conway's feelings.

"I suppose mother will never forgive me, nor you either," said Joanna wearily.

"Oh, I don't say that, child," said Mr. Conway, with some discomfort, "but there must be no more of this kind of thing. I am sorry for you, though I must say I thought better of you, and, of course, I can't answer for your mother."

Joanna felt the reconciliation was not worth much.

Then a very miserable week began for her. Mr. Conway was cold and displeased; her mother would not speak to her, and to mark her displeasure, for the first time for years she addressed Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, triumphant at her return to favour, showed her anger with Joanna very plainly, and Polly, who was full of sympathy, was not allowed to speak to her aunt, lest she should be corrupted.

Out of doors things were not much better; Mrs. Chester, Mrs. Moreland, and Miss Clarke were one and all scandalised, and the whole village knew of Joanna's doings.

Even Mrs. FitzHerbert, who had been so kind to her, wrote rather a cold letter in return for the carving which Joanna had sent her, or at least she thought so; but whether this was imagination or not, she certainly omitted to ask Joanna to go to see her.

Mr. Conway had stopped the carving lessons. He said that somebody could not be spared to go with Joanna each time, and she certainly could not be trusted alone. If she went even outside the gates, she was expected to say where she had been.

It did not seem to occur to her family that this was the very way to drive her to thoughts of Nicholas.

But these thoughts were worst of all; was it possible that her father was right, and that she had lowered herself in his estimation?

Joanna did not believe it, but inconsistently the thought made her miserable all the same.

One day she had been down to the post-office with a telegram for her father. She had sent it off, and she was returning with depressed steps to Cliff House; she was too depressed even to look round when she heard wheels behind her, till she was suddenly startled by a shout.

"Stop! stop!" cried somebody, in a voice that was very familiar to Joanna's ears, and without waiting for the car to pull up entirely, somehow or other Lady Hilda West was in the street beside her.

"I said I would come to see you some day!" said Lady Hilda.

And though they were in front of McCracken's shop, with half the village staring at the newcomer, Joanna flung her arms round Lady Hilda's neck, with a choking sob.

"Oh, Hilda, I am so glad to see you—what a comfort! Now everything will go right," she cried.

She had not had the least idea how glad she would be to see the girl again; the relief in her own voice surprised her.

It surprised Lady Hilda too, and touched her as well.

"My dear Jo, you flatter me," she said, with a shaky little laugh.

"Oh, I like to hear you call me that again," said Joanna eagerly. "Oh, Hilda, is it really you? I can't believe it."

"My dear, it is me," said Lady Hilda grammatically, "as large as life and twice as beautiful. Can you guide me to my destination, if I let this vehicle go on with my belongings?"

"Oh, yes," said Joanna. "Roddy, you are to drive on to the Lodge."

"Let me get out my umbrella first," said Lady Hilda. "The last piece of advice I got before I left England was never to let myself be beguiled two steps from shelter without an umbrella. Does the man know his way?"

"Is it the way to the Lodge, you mean?" said Roddy, in high contempt, and without further parley he drove away.

Then Hilda and Joanna looked at each other, and laughed for the very pleasure of meeting.

"My little Jo," said Lady Hilda, "you have grown into a woman. Are you surprised to see me?"

"I am surprised, but I am glad—oh, I am so glad!" said Joanna. "Everything is so miserable and in such a mess."

"I don't think I am the best person in the world to bring order out of chaos," said Lady Hilda. "Do you know, this is an entirely unauthorized proceeding on my part, against the advice of my best friends. I got a letter from Florence, forwarded after me from place to place in Norway, and I only got back to England on Tuesday. I saw Meredyth the day before yesterday, at a cricket match at Lord's; it was a guards' match, and the Campbell twins were playing."

"Oh," said Joanna, drawing a long breath, "you make me feel as if I were back at Merevale!"

"Do you remember somebody else at Merevale, Joanna? What would you think if I were to marry Lord Dawley?"

"You have threatened me with that so long that I am beginning to be less frightened," said Joanna.

"Long threatened, comes at last," said Lady Hilda, laughing. "Isn't it remarkable to hear me quoting proverbs? Well, I expect we shall be married, unless, indeed, this little expedition shocks my future lord and master too much. My dear Jo, when I read that girls remain unmarried in the proportion of three to four for want of ever a man to marry them, I reflect that I mustn't be too particular. A nice young man, heir to a dukedom, with goodness knows how many thousands a year, is not to be sneezed at in these bad times. There! that is one of the nice expressions I picked up from a charming man who sat next me at the table-d'hôte in one of the hotels in Norway. He was a commercial traveller, and we got quite intimate. He must have thought me intelligent, too, for he asked me if my father was in the business. Dawley was awfully shocked. You know he went in his yacht?"

Lady Hilda had talked rapidly to get away from the subject of Lord Dawley and matrimony, and then inconsistently returned to it at the end.

But Joanna, who was not quite sure that she was serious, said no more about it just then.

They parted at the Lodge gate, with a promise from Lady Hilda to come and see Joanna next day, and the world seemed much more cheerful than it had been an hour ago.

CHAPTER LI.

“Love in a hut, with water and a crust,
Is—love, forgive us!—cinders, ashes, dust.”

“HILDA!” cried Lady Florence. “Good gracious me, why didn’t you say you were coming? I couldn’t imagine who the luggage at the door belonged to!”

“I did think of telegraphing,” said Hilda calmly. “Ugh, how this room smells of something—ether, is it? Can’t the luggage come in? I am here on your own invitation, Florence, which followed me to Norway.”

“What in the world am I to do?” cried Lady Florence, still in consternation. “There’s neither a bed nor a bath for you!”

Hilda burst out laughing.

“Nor a place for your maid——”

“I haven’t brought one,” said Hilda, “and as for a bed, a mattress will do. I should like a bath, certainly, but I dare say it can be managed.”

“I don’t see how, I am sure,” said Lady Florence helplessly.

“Well, at present I only want something to eat,” said Lady Hilda. “I am half-starving.”

“I don’t think there is anything in the house but part of a leg of cold mutton.”

Her sister opened her eyes very wide, but she only said: “Well, I’m not particular; I rather like cold mutton. Hullo! Nick, how are you?”

“Hilda!” cried Nicholas, gazing at her with dismay.

“Well, neither of you seem very pleased to see me,” said Hilda placidly, “which doesn’t embarrass me so much as it might have done if I hadn’t come on Florence’s particular invitation. Nick, I can’t go back to-night, so can somebody bring in my belongings, and would you pay the car-man for me?”

“I am afraid I haven’t got any—change,” said Nicholas, turning red.

“Which means that there isn’t any money in the house,” said Lady Florence. “He came home from Derry last night without a shilling in his pocket.”

Nicholas said nothing, but he gave Lady Florence a look which silenced her.

“Oh, I have got lots of change,” said Lady Hilda hastily. “It was sheer laziness, because my pocket is so hard to get at in this dress.”

Nicholas followed her as she hurried into the little hall, and took out her purse.

"Hilda," he said, "this is not the place for you."

"Nick," she said, "somehow I don't think you are the right person to say so."

Then she turned to the driver, and had her box brought into the hall, which it nearly filled.

"You don't know everything," said Nicholas, with a sigh; "but you will very soon."

"I have always been wonderfully capable of taking care of myself, my good Nick," said Lady Hilda.

Then they went back to the office.

"What about that mutton bone, Florence?" she began, and then the entrance of Mrs. Carroll with the baby startled her beyond measure.

Here was an entirely new complication of which she had heard nothing.

She stared at the baby; she put up her eyeglass and surveyed it with a perturbed face.

Was this little creature to put an end to all her half-formed plans and ideas? Could anything ever be forgotten or ignored now, with this child as a sign of what had been?"

When Mrs. Carroll had been given her instructions about the cold mutton, and had left the room, she turned to her sister with a face of unconcealed dismay.

"Didn't you know?" Lady Florence said, flushing faintly.

"You never told me; you never said anything in your letter."

"Well, I am sure I meant to tell you—I thought I had told you," said Lady Florence, rather sharply. "But the fact of the matter is, I was so worried when I wrote to you that I hardly knew what I was saying."

For the time Hilda said no more. They talked of common-places, of mutual friends, of Hilda's Norwegian trip, of her engagement to Lord Dawley, keeping off awkward topics by general consent.

But when the two sisters found themselves alone upstairs, this could not go on.

"This is our room," said Lady Florence. "You had better come in here to take off your hat, for the one you are to sleep in is not ready. Nick has been using it as his dressing room, and I am sure I don't know what he will do now."

"Look here, Florence, did you not want me to come after all? You don't seem particularly glad to see me."

"I did want you to come, as much as I can want to see anybody in this hole. Hilda, it is awful," said Lady Florence, throwing herself dejectedly upon the bed; "the short and the long of it is, I can't bear it! Do you think there is any chance—the smallest—the remotest—that James would be kind? I would go on my knees to him if I thought it would

be of any use. I would agree to stay in Northumberland half the year if he liked."

"Come into my room," said Lady Hilda. She was not a person of particularly delicate susceptibilities, and she prided herself on calling a spade a spade, but to sit there and talk of Lady Florence's return to her husband was more than she could stand.

The room intended for her was crammed with trunks and portmanteaus, with a small space which Nicholas had used to dress in, and a big glass, which he had bought in Derry, filling up a corner. There were signs of his presence here, too; his shaving apparatus, his hair-brushes, and an array of boots of all kinds, but there was no sign of a bed, and no room at all for one, and Hilda's prospects for the night looked rather questionable.

But Lady Florence was much too full of her own troubles to disturb herself about anything else just then.

She seated herself upon a convenient, but rather dusty, trunk, and continued her lament.

"I think James has treated me very badly," she said, "and it is his duty to do something for me. Hilda, you can have no idea of the miseries of life here; one can hardly even get common necessities—and the dulness! It is all very well for Nick, he goes out and amuses himself; but if you don't do something for me, Hilda, I don't know what I shall do—I shall go mad, or kill myself."

"It doesn't strike me as a fancy abode certainly," said Lady Hilda calmly, "but, Florence, though I am always against hitting a fellow when he is down, I must remind you that under any circumstances there would be some difficulties about your going into society just at present."

"Which is no reason that I should live like a savage," said Lady Florence sullenly. "As for Nicholas, he is so completely selfish that he never troubles his head about me. Hilda, have you no pity? Will you go to James and tell him that he has treated me cruelly, but that I am willing to go back to him?"

"I don't exactly see my way to doing that at present," said Lady Hilda.

Lady Florence burst into tears.

"You are just like the rest!" she said. "You don't care what becomes of me, or how miserable I am."

"You see, you care so very much yourself," said Lady Hilda. "But after all, Florence, I haven't come here to make myself disagreeable, and I will certainly do whatever I can for you. Will you let me think it over till to-morrow, and we will try and have a pleasant evening and forget our troubles to-night?"

But this was not Lady Florence's idea at all ; having secured a fresh listener for her woes, she was comparatively happy, and everything was retailed for Hilda's benefit before they went downstairs.

But it was not till next morning, after a night of doubtful comfort on a little stretcher, which had somehow been squeezed in among the trunks, that she and Nicholas were alone together.

Hilda had had no temptation to remain in bed late ; there were not even shutters to her window, and the sun had crept in through the thin blind and waked her up.

When Nicholas came in from an early visit to the stables, he found her with a large kitchen apron over her dress, and Mrs. Carroll's broom, busily engaged in sweeping out the office.

"I didn't mean you to catch me," she said, with a laugh, "but I simply can't stand dust, and Florence and Mrs. Carroll don't seem to share my aversion."

"Give the thing to me," said Nicholas, not looking particularly well pleased.

"Indeed, I shall do no such thing," said Lady Hilda briskly. "Why, I have only just finished scattering tea-leaves, under Mrs. Carroll's instructions, and I am beginning to enjoy myself. Give me a cigarette, instead, and get out of my way."

Whereupon Nicholas swung himself onto a table and watched her in silence, and Hilda swept on, and declined to take any notice of him.

They had known each other for a good many years, and there had always been a half-chaffing flirtation between them, which would probably have continued undisturbed had he been genuinely her brother-in-law, but as it was, it had been replaced by a decided awkwardness and difficulty.

Hilda prided herself on judging nobody ; as far as her sister was concerned, in her secret heart she believed that if it had not been Nicholas, it would have been somebody else.

She had a half-contemptuous liking for him still ; he was no worse, she considered, than other men, always excepting one only, and he certainly looked very handsome and young and pleasant.

He was much less at his ease. Would Hilda say disagreeable things to him ; would she not feel herself bound to say disagreeable things ?

"Hilda," he said, at last, to break the silence, which was more embarrassing to him than to her, as he had nothing to do, "what are you going to do now ?"

"After I have finished sweeping, Mrs. Carroll informs me, breakfast will be ready, so I contemplate pouring out your tea."

"I don't mean that at all," said Nicholas. "I mean, have you any message, or any arrangement to propose?"

"I have no message," said Lady Hilda gravely; "and as to arrangements, why, all that depends upon what you and Florence decide."

"Nothing can make matters worse than they are at present," said Nicholas gloomily. "If anything can be arranged about a divorce, of course I am ready to marry Florence if she wishes, but she says she can't stand living here, and for that matter, it is enough to drive anyone mad."

"I don't know what is to be done," said Lady Hilda, ceasing to brush. "I will take Florence back with me if she wishes, but if I do, there will certainly be the devil to pay as far as Dawley is concerned."

"You had better not mix yourself up in it, Hilda," said Nicholas. "We have made an awful mess of it, but we can't go back, either of us, and as far as I can see, the only thing left for us is to try and slide along as comfortably as we can."

"That is what you have tried to do all your life, Nick," said Lady Hilda, "and I can't see that you have made much of it."

CHAPTER LII.

"They were so queer, so very queer,
I laughed as I would die."

JOANNA was in the garden when Lady Hilda came to her.

Her carving had gone very badly that morning, and she had come out to see if a little fresh air would steady her hand and her head.

What was going on at the Lodge? Were Nicholas and Lady Florence to be married at last? And if they were, what hope was there for him with a woman like that for his wife? But after all, was she worse than any of the others? Joanna, with her one experience of country house life, was quite inclined to agree with Lady Jeune in her sweeping denunciation of modern society.

But it was she, she herself, that Nicholas loved, and knowing this, nothing seemed the same.

It was a knowledge which ought not to have made her glad, and she religiously did her best to believe that it did not.

But for once she allowed herself to sit in the seat where she and Nicholas had sat the first time they were together in the garden, and many a time afterwards, and to think of him. At home they were all angry with her, and meeting Lady Hilda had brought back old times so vividly.

But the bitterness of it all was beginning to overcome every other feeling by the time Lady Hilda came, with her loud cheerful voice and her bright face.

"I discovered this young woman on the steps and insisted upon her guiding me here," said Lady Hilda, producing Polly, who looked very conscious of a dirty pinafore and holes in her stockings; "and she tells me she is the celebrated Polly of whom I heard so much at Merevale."

"And a nice vision she is," said Joanna rather sharply, as was not unnatural, considering she had spent twenty minutes mending that identical pair of stockings the night before. "Polly, get out of my sight—you have been climbing again."

Upon which Polly obediently vanished.

"Well, Jo, I have had a very exciting night of it," said Hilda cheerfully; "having spent it upon a rather eccentric spring bed, which collapsed whenever I went to sleep. You haven't taken to cigarettes yet, have you? I smoke all day long since I went to Norway, and Dawley gave me this case the other day—isn't it a pretty one? Gold and no mistake about it."

"Then you are really going to marry Lord Dawley?" said Joanna.

"Really I am," said Hilda calmly. "His mother has the most lovely diamonds, but that wouldn't tempt me. It's the yacht and the best shooting in Scotland, not to speak of my future lord and master's pretty pink face."

"I hope you will be happy. Oh, Hilda, I do hope you will be happy!"

"You don't seem to think it is likely, but then you were always prejudiced against Dawley. Do you remember 'Absent yet Present' at the Merevale concert?"

In the middle of reminiscences of Merevale Joanna began to be troubled with thoughts of lunch. Did Lady Hilda intend to stay, and if so, what was there for her to eat? Though lunch at the Cliff House was in fact early dinner, it was not apt to be very luxurious, and guests did not drop in uninvited.

Had Polly told Mrs. Conway that a visitor was there, and even if she had, would Mrs. Conway be willing to have Lady Florence Delacque's sister at her table?

At last Lady Hilda came round to speak of the Lodge and her sister with some hesitation.

"Florence is a most extraordinary person," she said. "I do wrong things often enough, but when I do, I know they are wrong, and am either ashamed of myself or determined to brazen it out. But she is neither one thing nor the other; she is evidently genuinely sorry for herself, and is ready to blame anybody but herself for the present state of affairs,

James Delacque, or Nick,—or you or I, for that matter, very likely.”

Did Hilda know the worst of her sister, Joanna wondered.

“Have you seen her, Jo?”

Joanna nodded. “And Nicholas too.”

“But Joanna——”

“Hilda, don’t let us talk of it,” said Joanna. “Talking does no good, and the whole world seems to have gone wrong somehow.”

A year ago she could have spoken of it all to Lady Hilda, but every month made speech more difficult. And good-natured as she was, Hilda could not understand—only Nicholas could fully understand.

Joanna was even glad to see her mother coming toward them in the pause which followed.

It was evident that Mrs. Conway expected a visitor; she had put on her Sunday dress and a bonnet, which was not her usual attire for the garden.

But Joanna’s fears were by no means set at rest; would Mrs. Conway follow up her introduction by denouncing Lady Florence Delacque, and declining to receive Lady Hilda, or, if she proved willing to overlook these things, was Lady Hilda’s behaviour to be depended upon? Joanna knew her too well to believe that anything would restrain her if she once became possessed by the spirit of mischief.

Even at that moment she did not look at all like Mrs. Conway’s ideal young woman. She had a sailor hat on the back of her head, and a tailor-made shooting dress, which did not reach to her ankles, and was completed by a pair of spats, Mrs. Conway’s abhorrence. She had a walking-stick in her hand, and Mrs. Conway considered walking-sticks unfeminine, and a cigarette in her mouth, which was worst of all.

The tailor-made gown in itself would have been quite enough to incur Mrs. Conway’s disapprobation, and all Joanna could hope for was that her mother would consider that things were so bad as to be beyond remonstrance.

“Mother,” she said nervously, “may I introduce Lady Hilda West?”

Mrs. Conway had not spoken to her for the last few days, and had ignored all her remarks, but though she still looked past her daughter as if she was invisible, she accepted her introduction.

“How do you do, Lady Hilda!” she said graciously; “I hope you will give us the pleasure of your company at lunch.”

“Thank you very much; I shall be delighted!” said Lady Hilda.

It would be pleasant to speak to Miss Clarke of “the day

when Lady Hilda West lunched with us," but Mrs. Conway honestly believed it was Christian charity that dictated her reception.

Everything went very smoothly at first; Mrs. Conway and Hilda walked up to the house together and talked of the weather and the country with much politeness.

But this agreeable state of affairs lasted precisely till grace had been said and they were all seated at luncheon.

Mrs. Conway sat erect and formal at the head of the table, apologised for the absence of fish, sent Polly for a napkin for Lady Hilda, and followed Maggie with her eyes so sternly that that young woman's waiting, always perfunctory, became worse than usual in her nervousness.

Mrs. Conway even did violence to her feelings so far as to offer Lady Hilda wine, and it was over this she first saw reason to disapprove of her guest.

"There is some claret in the sideboard," she said, in a discouraging tone. "I can't say that I myself approve of wine at this time of day, or indeed at any time, but I daresay you are accustomed to it."

"No, I quite agree with you," said Lady Hilda sweetly; "I never take anything now, unless indeed you wouldn't be shocked at my having a little whiskey and soda?"

But Mrs. Conway was shocked—very much shocked.

"You must excuse me, Lady Hilda West," she said; "there is no whiskey in the house except what Mr. Conway keeps under lock and key."

"It doesn't matter in the least," said Lady Hilda; "only I wonder you have never taken to it yourself; there is nothing makes you feel so fit, if you are tired or wet after a day's shooting, for instance."

The idea of Mrs. Conway, tired and wet after a day's shooting, seemed rather inappropriate, and in the middle of a stony silence Joanna unfortunately laughed.

But her mother merely looked at her and then turned to the worst offender.

"I do not approve of wine or spirits in any form," she said, with crushing severity.

"No?" said Lady Hilda, unabashed.

Mrs. Conway might alarm her family, who were now in a in a state of the gravest anxiety, but her guest was not so easily dismayed.

But after this there was a great peace, which lasted till Mr. Jellett became a bone of contention.

"He is a truly Christian young man, who does his utmost to serve his Master," said Mrs. Conway, with whom Mr. Jellett was just then in high favour. "It would give me pleasure—the greatest pleasure—to introduce him to you."

"Oh, pray don't," said Lady Hilda fervently; "if there is anyone I detest, it is a Christian young man, and, in fact, the only man in the shape of a clergyman that I can stand is a dear little curé I met in Norway, who was perfectly charming."

"I can only hope you do not mean what you say, Lady Hilda," said Mrs. Conway.

"I am afraid I do," said Hilda. "Joanna, my little curé had the most lovely eyes, and he used to look at me—just like Mr. Santon. Do you remember how he used to gaze at you over the billiard table?"

Lady Hilda was making herself agreeable with a vengeance.

"Yes," said Joanna hastily. "But what a lot of people you seem to have met at Norway."

"As to clergymen," pursued Lady Hilda, "don't you agree with me, honestly, Mrs. Conway, that they are rather apt to turn into old women? My sister went in for them, if you like; she used to go to confession for nearly a year after she was grown up, and then her saintly and exceedingly handsome instructor was removed for coming to church drunk one Sunday, and we had an old man with a family instead, so she never went any more."

"For what we have received the Lord make us truly thankful," said Mrs. Conway abruptly, much to the indignation of Polly, who had not succeeded in finishing her pudding owing to her deep interest in the conversation.

"Oh, Hilda, how could you talk like that?" said Joanna.

"Why, you don't call that anything?" said Hilda, laughing. "It's nothing to what I can do if I try, and I was only just beginning."

"Well, I think it was horrid of you," said Joanna.

"I couldn't resist your mother's face. Besides, it is really all quite true about Florence's confessor. Now, Jo, don't look so prim, and take me to see your carving in case your mother never lets me into the house again."

Which Joanna secretly felt was more than likely.

She had been working very hard lately, and she had a good many carvings on hand, which Lady Hilda insisted on looking at one after the other.

"Jo," she said, "I needn't preface what I am going to say by telling you that I know nothing about carving, because you are aware of this, but are you also aware how completely different your work is now from what it was in Merevale times? Even I can see the difference."

"Do you mean, better?" said Joanna, flushing.

"I should think I do. I mean that it is *alive*, which it wasn't then. I am not a fool, Jo, if I don't understand about carving, and in my opinion there's a touch of the real thing about it—this is more than just clever carving."

"I have sometimes begun to hope," said Joanna, with brightening eyes.

"Well, if Meredyth comes over, take my advice, and show it to him; he does know something about it."

"But is he coming?" said Joanna. "Oh, Hilda, I should like to see him again; he was so kind to me, and I never thanked him."

"I don't know. I don't know whether to send for him or not. I will try what I can do first," said Lady Hilda, "for he is very busy. But he spoke of coming, when he heard that they were here. He wants to get Nick, at least, out of the country."

To get Nick out of the country. To dispose of him, where he could go comfortably to the bad if he liked, well out of his connections' sight.

Joanna said to herself bitterly that she knew what that meant, and her face hardened.

"At any rate, your father will have a letter from Meredyth to-morrow," said Lady Hilda, and she would say no more.

CHAPTER LIII.

"Love is maintained by wealth; when all is spent
Adversity then breeds the discontent."

"I CAN pity Nicholas now," said Lady Hilda.

She had come into her sister's room, and found Lady Florence lying on her bed, trying to make up her mind to rouse herself and dress for dinner.

She started up, and looked at Hilda with dismay.

"What is wrong?" she said. "Why do you look at me like that? What has Nick been saying?"

"There is no good in exciting yourself, Florence," said Hilda gravely. "Nobody has told me anything—it was not necessary that anybody should tell me. I was neither blind nor a fool when I came in a few hours ago."

"Oh, you are going to desert me too!" cried Lady Florence, bursting into tears. "I am so miserable! Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do!"

Hilda drew a chair up to the bedside and sat down.

"Hush!" she said; "I am not going to desert you, as you call it. It is very unpleasant and very disgusting, and the sort of thing I never could understand, but all the same——"

"You can't understand it—how could you? But if you lived here, you would understand it!" cried Lady Florence

passionately. "Can you understand getting up every morning, with nothing to do and nobody to speak to all day long? Knowing that it would be the same always on and on and on, as long as you lived? Hilda, I can't live without excitement—I cannot—it breaks my heart!"

"There is a good deal in what you say," said Hilda.

"Just think of this hole to live in, without money—without even a maid," said Lady Florence, unconscious of any bathos in descending to particulars; "and other people amusing themselves who are no better than I am; and Judith, who makes herself a perfect nuisance to men. Hilda, I am the most miserable, unfortunate woman in the world!"

"I certainly don't think you are very happy," said Hilda. "Look here, Florence, what do you say to this? You know I am not rolling in wealth, and I shall have my trousseau to attend to in the autumn, but if you will agree to my conditions, I think I can promise you three hundred a year, which is better than nothing, and I may be able to do more when I am married. Then there is your own money——"

"Oh, Hilda, Hilda, I will agree to anything if you will get me away from here," cried Lady Florence, catching her sister's hand.

"You can guess my first condition," said Lady Hilda gravely.

"Oh, yes, I will give it up—I promise I will give it up, once I leave this place."

"I thought," said Lady Hilda—"my idea was, that you could manage to live somewhere abroad cheaply enough; somewhere where the baby could be educated later on——"

"The baby?" said Lady Florence blankly.

"The baby," said Lady Hilda decidedly.

"But, I cannot take the child."

"Why not?"

"Because it is impossible—it is out of the question. What could I do with it when I was travelling about?"

"I did not know you intended to travel about," said Hilda. She looked at her sister with more curiosity than anger.

"Besides, do you want to make it impossible for me to be received again? Can't you see the awful awkwardness? Can't you see that you are unreasonable?"

"I can see your point of view," said Hilda calmly. "What do you propose yourself?"

"For the child? Oh, somebody can easily be found to look after it. I would be glad to have it if I could, but you see the impossibility? It is a miserable business. James must do something."

"I will not ask him," said Lady Hilda drily.

"And yet you know how much worse it will be for me. I

think that is very unkind of you," said Lady Florence. She was sitting up in bed, and looked brighter already.

"I would rather starve than go to him," said Lady Hilda.

"But of course that is purely a matter of opinion."

"It is easy for you to talk of starving, when you are going to marry a man with twenty thousand pounds a year," said Lady Florence. "I would certainly not go to him if it could be avoided, but you see for yourself that I cannot live on three or four hundred a year. It is simply impossible."

"I am sorry I cannot promise more," said Hilda.

"Oh, you are very kind—very kind indeed. But you see if I go abroad—to a place such as Monte Carlo, for instance—I must have decent clothes. Oh, Hilda, the very thought of getting away makes me forget all the misery," said Lady Florence, with glowing cheeks.

"But nothing is arranged, and in the meantime you had better change your dress," said Lady Hilda gravely.

"If I lost hope now, I should kill myself," said Lady Florence vehemently.

Hilda went downstairs and nursed the baby till dinner-time.

Something could be done with Lady Florence evidently, but what about the baby, and that almost equally helpless individual, Nicholas? Would it be right for her to make it possible for her sister to desert the child. And yet what Lady Florence said was true enough: if she took it with her it was impossible that anything could be forgotten. Lady Florence was not a woman who could console herself by being nothing but a mother to the child, whose coming she already resented. If she found herself shut up with it in some little French town things would be no better than they were here in Ballylone.

As for Nicholas, if he was to be arranged for, money would certainly be necessary.

Hilda made up her mind there was nothing to be done but to write to Lord Meredyth, and if anybody could make the best of a bad business, she had the fullest faith that he was the man.

He would arrange something for Nicholas, and help Hilda to decide about her sister and the child. The child—there was the chief difficulty, the worst difficulty of all.

A child nobody wanted, whose life was spoilt for her before ever she came into the world. Worse than all, a girl.

Lady Florence had evidently no intention of letting the responsibility rest upon her own shoulders.

She would probably have been very fond of her child if it had come to her lawfully and properly in the due course of events, and been a pretty child, with plenty of nurses and white frocks.

She and Nicholas would, without doubt, have been a charming married couple, with the addition of plenty of money and society.

It was not her fault that things had gone askew, that the baby was an increasing inconvenience, and that Nicholas was poor and selfish—at least Lady Florence did not consider it her fault.

She had been so pretty and so graceful and so fascinating all her life ; she had been petted and spoiled always, by her own family, and by everyone she knew; it was small wonder she had grown to think herself the most important person in her world.

Hilda remembered what a very poor second she had played to her sister in the old days at home ; she had not minded much so long as she had been free to amuse herself after her own fashion, but though she and Florence had always been excellent friends, she had not joined the rest of the family in worship.

Now she was the only one left to remember how systematically Florence had been taught to be selfish. When the first shock of disgust was over, she was sorry for her sister.

CHAPTER LIV.

“ Hélas ! où donc chercher ou trouver le bonheur ?
 En tous lieux, en tous temps, dans toute la nature,
 Nulle part tout entière, partout avec mesure,
 Et partout passager, hors de son seul auteur.”

“ AUNT JOANNA, grandfather wants you in the dining-room,” said Polly.

Joanna put down her carving and looked at the child in dismay.

“ What is the matter, Polly ? ” she said. “ Is anything more wrong ? ”

“ I don’t know,” said Polly. “ He called it out when I was in the hall, and said I was to be quick. I don’t *think* he was angry, but I am not sure.”

Joanna got up with a sigh ; somehow she felt as if she had reached the last stage of endurance this morning.

Hilda’s coming had been a joy, but there had been a good deal of pain in the joy. The near presence of Nicholas, and the remembrance of their meetings, kept her in a state of constant nervous excitement.

Any day, almost any hour of the day, she might see him ; the next person she met on the road, the next voice she heard might be his.

She had lain awake the whole night before, full of an intense overmastering excitement, which had no more cause or reason to come that night than any other.

The strain had suddenly become too great, and the false joy her meeting with Nicholas had brought her had all at once proved how false it was.

Then she had risen to a heavy, oppressive day, with thunder in the air, and rain in the low, dark clouds.

Mrs. Conway had been very irritable at breakfast; thunder always got upon her nerves.

Elizabeth had her breakfast in bed, so Joanna had been the nearest, and in every way the most convenient victim. Mrs. Conway had talked to her husband and at her daughter all breakfast time.

First Lady Hilda had been brought up for discussion and condemnation, then had come covert allusions to Sir Nicholas and Lady Florence, and finally remarks upon the wrong of giving an opening to gossip, upon the wickedness of girls nowadays, who cared for nothing but pleasure, casting aside modesty and womanly feeling in its pursuit.

Joanna bent her head low, and said nothing. It might all be true, very likely it was; she had been unwomanly and immodest.

Mrs. Conway always had prayers after breakfast, as she had discovered that her family had an inclination to shirk them if she had them before, and this morning her special prayers for Sir Nicholas and Lady Florence, and afterwards for Joanna herself, were so full of displeasure, and so unmistakable that Joanna was once or twice very near springing to her feet and leaving the room.

Now she felt she could bear no more; if her father had come back from his office at this hour to tell her of any fresh sin he had discovered, she simply could not stand it.

Mr. Conway was in the dining-room, and he was certainly excited, but he did not seem angry, indeed, he smiled at her when she came in, as he had not smiled for the last few days.

"Joanna," he said, "who do you think I heard from this morning? Such a nice, gentlemanly letter."

It was ridiculous that Nicholas' name should be the first to come into Joanna's head—it was so utterly out of the question that he should have written to Mr. Conway, and that if he had, her father should have spoken of his letter with such approval.

"I suppose a man's luck really is bound to change some day," said Mr. Conway jubilantly. "It was from your friend, Lord Meredyth, I heard, young woman, offering me his Irish agency, which is worth nearly four hundred a year, and may lead to all sorts of things. What do you say to that?"

Mr. Conway had lamented at breakfast that morning that an end to Irish landlords and agents was coming within the year, and that Home Rule was a certainty, so his rejoicing might have struck Joanna as rather unreasonable.

"I am very glad," she said, recognising an inadequacy in her tone.

But she *was* glad, and upon another day she would have been gladder still. Four hundred a year would make a great difference at Cliff House.

"And do you know who was the first person I thought of when I got the letter?" said Mr. Conway. "I thought, why, if Joanna still wants to go to London and work at her carving, here is a way of managing it. What do you say, Joanna? Shall we arrange it? Would you like to go?"

Joanna sat down abruptly in the nearest chair.

"Oh, father!" was all she said. Everything in the room seemed to be suddenly dim; there were tears rolling down her cheeks, she knew, but whether they were tears of joy or sorrow, she was not sure.

It was so good of him, so good of him even while he was angry with her, to think of her at once when good fortune came to them, and she *had* wanted to go to London very much, she knew she *would* want to go very much.

But just at first she was speechless, and Mr. Conway, who had not at all expected to have his news received after this fashion, stared at her in consternation.

"What is the matter, Joanna?" he said.

"I don't know, father," said Joanna meekly, drying her tears.

"If you have changed your mind about London now, there is no need for you to go," he said, looking a little damped.

"It is not that, father; it is only silliness," said Joanna, very much ashamed of herself. "It is so good of you; I *can't* thank you. I am so glad about it all, that——"

"That you look the picture of misery," said her father, surveying her.

"I believe it is because I am so glad that you are not angry with me any longer," said Joanna desperately. "I have been so miserable these last few days, that I didn't know what to do. Father, I never *meant* to do anything to make you ashamed of me, and I don't deserve you to be good to me."

"And I, who thought she didn't care a bit what was said to her," said Mr. Conway to himself.

In her own room Joanna knelt beside her bed, burying her face in the pillow to keep herself still.

How she had longed to go to London and have a chance like other people, ever since she had been a little thing! A

longing which had grown with her growth and strengthened with her strength, filling her whole mind.

She had fancied it to herself a hundred times, she had dreamt of it, thought of it, talked of it to her faithful Polly, almost before Polly had known where London was; she had said again and again that she would not mind what happened if she could go to London.

And now her dream was to be fulfilled; but what a difference!

Joanna remembered very well how she had grown impatient at the slowness with which the money to take her to London grew together, how she had got tired of the monotony of Ballylone, and had longed for something to happen—had even prayed for it one day, in a half-superstitious way. Something, no matter what. She only wanted to begin to live.

What limitless possibilities there had been before her, and she had had the courage which knew no pain to face everything!

Then Nicholas had come, and Joanna had said good-bye to childhood without a regret, and had started gaily into life without a single misgiving. There was no going back; every one of those days of happiness, she had passed through so lightly, had to be paid for now.

If she could only have them over again, she would know better how to enjoy them; she would not waste one minute, one second.

But then it had seemed to her that her life would be always the same.

Now, whatever happened, whatever good fortune might come, there would always be something wanting in her life, something which in this world could never be set right, not if Nicholas had been free to come to her that hour and ask her to marry him.

Not even with him could there be happiness now, perhaps less with him than with anybody. And yet he filled her world just as much as he had ever done. Joanna remembered a day a long time ago when she had locked herself in her room, half mad with toothache, and thought to herself, what should I do if I had not Nicholas? how could I bear the pain if I had not him to think about?

Now toothache or heartache or anything else must be borne alone.

She must go away, knowing that Nicholas loved her, knowing, too, very well, that when he saw her no longer he would care every day less and less.

She knew him so well.

She felt she could have understood him and taken care of him and forgiven him, and even kept him true, better than anybody else.

But the best thing she could do for him now was to leave him and never see him again.

Could it be all a bad dream? If she could succeed in awaking herself would she find that all was right as ever between Nicholas and her, that she had only to get up and go to meet him in the big meadow with a light heart.

Suddenly the rain came bursting down in a heavy sullen torrent.

CHAPTER LV.

“Words are like leaves : and where they most abound,
Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.”

“SIR NICHOLAS’ polo-cart has gone past, but Lord Meredyth can’t possibly be going to stay at the Lodge,” said Mrs. Moreland. “Why, as it is, Sir Nicholas must do without a dressing-room.”

“My dear Mrs. Moreland !” said Miss Clarke, extremely shocked.

But Mrs. Moreland being deaf, the remonstrance was unheard, and in any case would have been unheeded.

“The little McNat girl said that that room at McCracken’s had been taken for him—just to think of it—an earl and all,” said Mrs. Moreland, whose frank admiration of rank always annoyed Miss Clarke.

“I am sure,” she said loudly, “we would have been most willing to give him a bed, which would have been more what he was accustomed to, but under the circumstances——”

“My good woman, there would be little difference in his eyes between Mrs. McCracken’s and your little spare room. You are wise in letting well alone, for what do you know about the wants of that rank of life?” said Mrs. Moreland.

Whereupon Miss Clarke subsided into a sulky silence, and if she had seen any way to set about it, would then and there have made up her mind to offer Lord Meredyth shelter.

“He is the least troublesome person I ever knew,” said Joanna, from her corner.

Mrs. Moreland was taking her turn of having the Zenana meeting at her house, and on this occasion it only numbered four members, one being Polly.

The Chesters were always more than erratic, and during three successive wet days Mrs. Conway had succeeded in catching a bad cold.

So Joanna and Polly had been despatched down in the rain by themselves, and of all things Joanna hated a Zenana meet-

ing at Mrs. Moreland's, where the windows were never opened, let her son, in his medical capacity, remonstrate as he would.

Polly, safe from her grandmother's eye, was enjoying herself. She had got her feet thoroughly wet walking down, and they were at present encased in a pair of Mrs. Moreland's shoes and stockings, which afforded her intense satisfaction.

Besides, she was looking forward hopefully to tea, when she knew Mrs. Moreland always had a delightful cake, and always insisted that Polly should take home a large slice with her.

It was only very lately that Joanna had ceased to be expected to do likewise.

"So you are going away soon, Joanna," said Mrs. Moreland.

"Not till September, I think," said Joanna.

"And I am to go and live with her when she gets rich," said Polly; "that is to say if I promise never to have black nails. My nails are disgraceful, aren't they, Mrs. Moreland?" she ended with modest satisfaction.

"When I was a little girl, I should have been whipped for hands like that," said Mrs. Moreland.

"They *are* bad," said Polly. "Don't you think I had better go to your room and wash them?"

By which judicious move she secured her freedom till tea, to the extreme envy of her aunt.

Joanna stitched away at her little pink frock, and listened dreamily to the other two.

"Can you believe it," said Miss Clarke, "after all I have said to Mr. Jellett, I cannot impress upon him the necessity for having an afternoon Sunday-school for the children!"

"Why, there is Mrs. Conway——"

"Oh, I know she is very good," said Miss Clarke jealously; "but she has not the influence of a clergyman in his own parish. I said all I could to him; I represented to him that a great many of the children were going to the Presbyterian school in the afternoon, and that it was absolutely necessary that something should be done, and he said he quite agreed with me, but no effort has been made."

"Indeed, from all I hear, my dear, Mr. Jellett has other things than the Sabbath-school in his mind at present," said Mrs. Moreland impressively, and she finished her sentence in the stage whisper which had brought embarrassment to so many of her friends.

"They say he has been seen walking more than once with a certain lady, and with my own eyes I saw her speak to him on this street."

"It is really true, then?" said Miss Clarke, dropping her work.

"It may be or it may not," said Mrs. Moreland; "I am never one to condemn anybody."

"But you saw her speak to him?"

"I did, indeed; with her man's shirt and her stick, and her walk, as if the world was not good enough for her. Do you happen to have the strong white cotton, Joanna?"

Joanna did not mind what they talked about now; she would soon be away from it all, and when she remembered this, she realised that she had a sort of affection even for Miss Clarke, and that Mrs. Moreland had often been very good to her, and when she was a child had always welcomed her to the house.

But she was glad all the same when the sound of wheels created a diversion, and sent both Mrs. Moreland and Miss Clarke to the window.

A stranger of any kind, much less a real earl, was not to be seen every day in Ballylone.

Joanna did not go to the window; she would have run down to speak to Lord Meredyth had she not known what an excitement it would create, and how eagerly the conversation would be watched from the window. Besides, it was raining in torrents.

She sat still, and thought how nice it would be to see his friendly smile, and hear his voice again.

Consequently she missed an excellent view of the side of his hat, his ear and his shoulder.

Mrs. Moreland and Miss Clarke were a little disappointed.

"Between his coat and his umbrella one could not see much," said Miss Clarke. "However, there are candles to be got to-morrow at McCracken's and I will go up myself instead of sending Sarah."

Joanna was not unkind enough to suggest that Lord Meredyth might not spend his day hanging about the shop; she sewed away diligently and silently, and thought of him.

Presently the tea and Polly appeared simultaneously, and afterwards there were missionary reports to be read—to be read, too, at a shout for Mrs. Moreland's benefit.

Polly yawned and pricked her fingers; the close room always gave Joanna a headache, but she did not mind it so much as usual to-day. This kind of thing was not to go on just the same all her life till she grew old, as she had sometimes feared—there was a definite end approaching.

However, she was glad when it was all over, and she and Polly were free to roll up their work and start home through the rain.

Not, however, till she had refused a pressing invitation to stay for high tea and spend the evening, which Mrs. Moreland's unconquerably hospitable instincts always forced her to

proffer to her guests, also the use of a rather dilapidated pair of goloshes, which their owner was wont to wear tied on by an old pair of red garters.

"My boots were dried over the kitchen fire," said Polly, "and they feel so funny. Shall we go by the short cut, Aunt Joanna? It is not so very wet if you keep along by the side."

"No, no, we had better go round," said Joanna; but she said so as much because she hoped vaguely that they might meet Lord Meredyth as because the lane was muddy.

They did meet him, just as they left the village, and between the rain and her umbrella, and Polly clinging onto her arm, Joanna was very nearly passing him unrecognised.

But he, having neither umbrella nor little girl, stopped at once.

"Joanna," he said, quite eagerly.

He had always liked her since first she had come to Merevale, and, being sorry for her, in their long journey together he had grown to like her better still.

As for Joanna, she gave him her hand in silence, with the remembrance of their good-bye in the Belfast hotel coming back to her very freshly.

The silence had lasted quite long enough to surprise Polly before either of them spoke.

Then Lord Meredyth said: "Where are you going this awful day?"

"Home," said Joanna. "You have no umbrella."

"I can stand a good deal of wetting," said he, looking at her with the smile which was her most vivid remembrance of him, and turning.

"How is Lady Meredyth?" said Joanna, still a little embarrassed. The first moment of meeting again a person once liked very much is seldom altogether pleasant.

"Judith is in London, and very flourishing indeed. What about yourself? Hilda tells me I am to expect great things from your carving."

"I hope you will think it is better," said Joanna, flushing.

"I have worked very hard, and now I am going to London."

"Are you? I am awfully glad," said Lord Meredyth heartily. "I hope we shall see something of you. Is this Polly?"

Whereupon Polly entered into the conversation with much gratification.

Joanna did not say much; she wished she had courage to ask Lord Meredyth about Nicholas and what he intended to do, but Nicholas' name was a very hard one to say now, and, besides, she did not know whether it would be right for her to ask the question.

So she let Polly talk, and Lord Meredyth, who had a *culte* for children, was quite content to talk to her.

He said good-bye to them at Cliff House gate, in a momentary gleam of damp evening sunshine.

"I am coming to see your father to-morrow, Miss Conway," he said; "and then I am to see those carvings and pronounce my valuable opinion, am I not?"

"I am very glad you are coming," said Joanna.

"And so am I," said Polly.

"And I am very glad to see you again," Joanna added.

Then, as he turned away, she suddenly lowered her voice: "Lord Meredyth, I never thanked you for all your kindness——"

"We will have a long talk to-morrow," said Lord Meredyth rather hastily.

"And now, I am going to kiss my hand to you all down the road," said Polly; "and you will *promise* to look round before you turn the corner, won't you?"

"Indeed you will do no such thing, Polly," said Joanna. "You will come in this minute and get dry."

"Never mind, Polly; there's a great deal of tyranny in this world," said Lord Meredyth, laughing, and raising his hat.

Joanna had to bring all her good sense to the rescue to drive away a feeling of disappointment at the meeting. When they had parted, they had been forced by circumstances into a sudden intimacy, and now they seemed to have fallen back again to the level of mere acquaintances.

CHAPTER LVI.

"A great many difficulties arise from falling in love with the wrong person."

AFTER the three days' rain came a lovely morning.

Lord Meredyth breakfasted on rashers and eggs, and listened to Mrs. McCracken's rejoicings that her hay was still uncut, and her lament over the damage done to a field of ripening corn. He won her heart by his interest in crops and farming, which was quite genuine and practical.

Then he wrote a few business letters, and took them to the post for want of something better to do, and by this time it was half-past ten, which he considered a reasonable time to go up to the Lodge. He did not hurry himself in any way, and he rather enjoyed the walk; if there was mud on the roads, there was at least plenty of sun overhead.

It had been extremely inconvenient to come to Ireland just now, but it had been necessary, and there was no good worrying about it.

He had made up his mind the night before about what he was to do and say with regard to Sir Nicholas and Lady Florence, and he hoped everything could be settled very quickly.

He thought over Joanna a little ; being an extremely practical young man, he was troubled with none of her fanciful disappointment about their meeting. He had a very friendly feeling toward her, and determined that Judith should be kind to her in London.

Then his mind strayed to a certain half-formed system of drainage which he had not yet worked out to his own satisfaction, and he was deeply engrossed in measuring its advantages and disadvantages when he came to the Lodge gate, and found Lady Hilda waiting for him.

"I have been looking out for you for ever so long," she said. "The light comes into my room so much that I wake ever so early in the morning. What do you think of your abode ?"

"Oh, I'm in clover. I discovered my windows were nailed up, and insisted on my host admitting a little air, and for a permanence I should prefer that the young women at the other side of the street had not quite such a good view of my dressing operations. However, if it amused them, I am sure I am very glad. I slept all night, and had excellent rashers and eggs for breakfast."

"And now," said Lady Hilda, "have you made up your mind what you are going to do—what we are going to do ?"

Lord Meredyth leaned his elbows on the low gate, and drew thoughtful patterns on the gravel with his stick.

"I have thought it all over," he said, "and I will tell you what I propose, if you agree with me. First of all, I should like this to be clear : Is there no hope of a divorce, and are they willing to separate ?"

"Yes, to your second question at any rate," said Hilda. "Florence's one idea is to leave this place at any cost, and she is tired of Nicholas. It is something new she wants—some excitement."

"As to Nicholas Osborne, he never was two days of the same mind," said Lord Meredyth.

"Nick is disgusted with her—naturally," said Lady Hilda.

"It is a bad business all round," Lord Meredyth said. "But as far as Osborne himself is concerned, I see my way pretty clearly. My idea is to take this place off his hands for whatever it is worth, clear up his debts, and start him with a few

hundreds on a ranch of mine in America. If he refuses, he must just go on his own way."

"He won't refuse; he can't," said Hilda.

"That is simple enough," said Meredyth, absently drawing out his name on the gravel; "but the rest is not such plain sailing. The right thing unquestionably would be for your sister to take the child with her and go abroad."

"I am glad you think so," said Hilda, brightening. "It was what I proposed, but she would not hear of it."

"In the immediate future, she must leave this place. Isn't there anybody in the shape of an aunt or old cousin to whom you could telegraph to meet you in London, and look after Lady Florence, at any rate for the present?"

"I can take her to rooms myself——"

"That is out of the question," said Lord Meredyth with decision. "Dawley has already a very good right to complain. I am sorry you came here, Hilda, but as that can't be helped, I hope you will promise me to go to Judith at once when you get to London."

"Dawley must just take me as he finds me, or leave me alone," said Lady Hilda defiantly.

"If I were in his position, it would be a long time before I forgave you for going off in this way, without even saying where you were going to."

Lady Hilda flushed crimson.

"The devil looks after his own," she said sharply. "I am perfectly well able to take care of myself, Meredyth, and if Dawley doesn't know it yet, the sooner he finds out the better."

"Come Hilda, don't let us quarrel," said Lord Meredyth, holding out his hand with a smile. "After all it is certainly not *my* business to interfere with you, but it is just as well that I am *not* in Dawley's place, isn't it? You and I would always be quarrelling!"

Hilda's laugh did not sound particularly amused.

"We have wandered from the point to discuss my delinquencies," she said.

"The point is, do you think Florence would be willing to start this afternoon, and could you be ready then?"

"Yes," said Hilda briefly.

"Also, do you know of anyone to send for on such short notice?"

"I am going to be very obedient. I will give you the address of an aunt of ours, but I warn you that Florence hates her."

"We can't consult Florence's likes and dislikes," said Lord Meredyth shortly. "This is Tuesday; I will try to settle Osborne's concerns, and get him out of this by the end of the week. In the meantime, if you are able to arrange, with

Judith's help, for your sister to go abroad at once, with your aunt or some other suitable person, so much the better. As far as money matters go, you may count on me to the extent of a few hundreds a year——"

"Oh, Meredyth, we have no right whatever to come upon you for money," said Lady Hilda hastily. "I can do something, and then my cousin——"

"You can count upon me for anything up to five hundred a year, that is all I wanted to say," returned Lord Meredyth calmly. "If it isn't necessary, so much the better. One thing, Hilda, I don't think it is necessary or advisable to endow Florence with a large income; we don't want to reward her, and whatever she has, there are sure to be debts to pay at intervals."

"I shall be ready to start this afternoon, and I will do all you advise," Hilda said.

"As to the child, the woman of the house seems fond of it, and it had better remain here, till we can make some further arrangements, I think. When I remember that child, with its life simply destroyed for it, I feel that Osborne and Lady Florence deserve to be left without a helping hand," Meredyth ended, with a very stern face.

"I should like to have you for a judge, Jack," said Lady Hilda, "if it was justice I wanted, but not if it was mercy. You help, but with *such* a contempt for the sinners you are helping!"

"It is that child's life I can't forgive them," said Lord Meredyth. "Hilda, it's an odd world; here's this child that nobody wants, and there's nothing I wouldn't give for a child of my own."

Hilda leaned upon the gate absolutely silent; she knew that this was a disappointment which grew and strengthened in bitterness every year.

"Well, we don't seem to be able to keep away from our own concerns," Lord Meredyth said a moment later, with a laugh. "Come up to the house, Hilda, and I'll speak to Osborne, while you settle matters with your sister."

The terms between Lord Meredyth and his brother-in-law had never been very cordial at the best of times.

He had from time to time lent Nicholas money and helped him in various ways, but he had never made much effort to conceal that he looked upon him with contemptuous tolerance, and Nicholas, with his sensitiveness to other people's opinion, had not failed to recognise this feeling, and to dislike Meredyth proportionably.

With him, Nicholas' usual good temper deserted him.

Still, he was quite aware that if any help were to come in the present state of affairs, it would be from Meredyth.

He was not at all pleased to see him in Ballylone ; he was ashamed of his surroundings, and he remembered too well how he had described the place to him as a shooting lodge, which was convenient if a little rough.

He would have liked to avoid Meredyth altogether, but as this was clearly impossible he greeted him very civilly when he came into the office.

He was lounging in his favourite chair, with a pipe in his mouth, but he got up to shake hands with his visitor.

"Will you have a cigar, Meredyth?" he said; "there are some very decent ones here. Have you seen the papers this morning; we get the *Times* and the *Morning Post*."

But Lord Meredyth had not come to the lodge to smoke or read the papers. He leaned against the mantel board, and with very little preliminary he made his offer.

Osborne must understand that no very gorgeous position was offered to him, but Meredyth knew he could ride, and if he was willing to work hard, he would be glad to help him later on in any way in his power. He hoped Nicholas would see his way to letting him know his decision as soon as possible.

Nicholas listened to him with a very sullen face, pulling his moustache and shifting his position nervously.

He answered, stammering more than usual: "I d-don't see that I have any choice, Meredyth, except to th-thank you."

"I don't see that you have," said Meredyth. "You see, Sylvain has made it impossible for you to go back to England. If you take my advice, you will go as soon as we can arrange about the disposal of this place, and the settlement of any debts you may have."

"I am sure I have no wish to delay matters."

There was a short silence. Nicholas stood with frowning eyes bent on the ground, and Meredyth, having said what he had intended to say, was wondering if it would be well to go into further particulars at once.

"There is one thing more, Meredyth," said Nicholas. "Of course I am ready to do anything I can for Florence; I am even ready to take her with me if she wishes, though I can't say I am willing. You know the whole business, and you can't think I am to blame for this?"

Even now, even with Meredyth, Nicholas clung to his old habit of trying to make the best of his case.

"I don't want to judge you, I am sure," said Meredyth.

"Look here, Meredyth; come to the window for a minute. Do you see that fellow sitting on the door-step? He comes every morning to beg, say what I will."

"I see him," Meredyth said shortly.

"Well, when I first came here that poor devil was earning fair wages and getting on well enough, looking after the Conways' place ; now he can hardly drag himself along ; he is half an idiot and half a beast. It's ether that has done it," Nicholas ended shortly.

Meredyth did not answer directly.

"I think I'll have a cigar after all, Osborne," he said.

CHAPTER LVII.

•

"I classed, appraising once,
Earth's lamentable sounds; the welladay,
The jarring yea and nay,
The fall of kisses on unanswering clay,
The sobbed farewell, the welcome mournfuller ;—
But all did leaven the air
With a less bitter leaven of sore despair,
Than these words—'I loved *once*.'"

THERE was a great deal to be done at the Lodge that day.

Lady Florence's boxes had to be unpiled in the lumber room, and her numerous garments collected and packed.

She herself was almost incapable from excitement and bewilderment, and most of the packing fell upon Lady Hilda's shoulders. As for Mrs. Carroll, she was here, there, and everywhere, and thought no trouble too great in her joy at getting rid of Lady Florence.

Hilda managed to secure a few minutes to rush over to Cliff House to say good-bye to Joanna. It was a very hurried and unsatisfactory good-bye. Lady Hilda said that she was going, made Joanna promise to come to her wedding in September, asked if she could get any embroidery done for her in the neighbourhood, and said she would write when she got to London.

At the end, she casually mentioned that Lady Florence was going too, but she was in too great a hurry to wait and explain.

"And Nicholas ?" asked Joanna, holding her arm.

"Oh, Nicholas—he is going later," said Lady Hilda. "I really haven't a second, Jo. Good-bye till we meet in London."

And of these hasty words Joanna could make nothing.

But Hilda had no time for more ; she got back to find the boxes being corded, and that Lady Florence had completely omitted to pack anything in the shape of brushes and combs and washing apparatus.

Lord Meredyth was nowhere to be seen ; Nicholas was wandering about rather forlornly.

He was vaguely unhappy, touched by the approaching parting into something of his old desire for the unattainable, and undecided about going upstairs to say good-bye to Lady Florence.

Hilda settled the question for him.

"Nick, have you seen Florence?" she said. "You had better go upstairs and get it over, and then make yourself scarce."

Nicholas was quite glad to have anybody to obey on that day of confusion.

He went upstairs slowly, and went to Lady Florence with lingering steps.

She did not turn round when he came in. She was standing before the glass, twisting up her long, curly red hair, with raised arms, and her pretty face a little flushed.

Nicholas remembered the time when it had seemed to him the one thing desirable to touch that wavy, shining hair; later, the first time he had kissed her lips; later still——

He had given up everything to possess her wholly: his former prospects, which seemed to him much brighter now than they had done at the time, the love of a good girl—everything had seemed to him easier than to give up this woman. And now the time had come when of their own will they were to separate, to say good-bye forever with scarcely a regret.

Passion had passed away, and there was neither love nor respect to fill its place.

Nicholas did not analyse his feelings; he knew that he felt troubled and touched as he looked at her, but he did not stop to ask himself why.

When Lady Florence turned round she met his eyes with some shadow of their old expression, and it frightened her. Was it possible that he would want to keep her with him—would not be willing to let her go after all?

"Nick," she said nervously, "did you order the cart?"

"Yes," said Nicholas; "it is all right. I have come to say good-bye."

"I am very sorry," said Lady Florence.

"I am very sorry too," said Nicholas hoarsely. "Sorry for all the harm I have done you. Florence, you know this is not my doing. I am willing to stand by you if you wish it."

Lady Florence drew a long breath.

"Nick, dear," she said, "you know nobody is more sorry to say good-bye than I am, but you must see, too, that anything else is impossible—we can't starve."

The answer was what he had fully expected, had hoped for, but it caused him an unreasonable pang. Was it a last memory of the love that had died away, or was it only wounded vanity?

"We can say good-bye as friends, at least," he said.

"Yes, dear, certainly; I hope we shall meet again some day," said Lady Florence, turning away from the glass. She had finished twisting up her hair, and she was almost ready to go.

She went over to Nicholas and held up her cheek to be kissed, calmly, sorry to say good-bye, but with a thousand other thoughts distracting her mind.

Nicholas kissed her; he was not very sorry either, but he was sorry that he was not sorry.

"Good-bye, darling," he said, but there was no heart in the word.

The bathos of it all, he thought, as he went downstairs. That such a parting between them should be possible!

Lady Florence, in the hurry and excitement of departure, had only time for a sigh and a muttered, "Poor fellow!"

She had not thought he would have been so sorry to say good-bye, and she was rather flattered and gratified. But it was not saying good-bye that made Nicholas sorry.

The rest was over very soon. She said good-bye to the baby with a few tears, distracted by fears that one of her boxes had been forgotten, and Lord Meredyth sent Carroll on ahead to the station with the luggage, and himself drove down Lady Florence and Hilda.

Nicholas did not put in an appearance again.

"Lord Meredyth," said Lady Florence, with tears, "try and think as well of me as you can."

"Yes," said Lord Meredyth briefly, and that was all that was said on the way down to the station.

All Ballylone was about the streets in a state of vague excitement. Everybody knew that Lady Florence was going, and everybody had formed different conjectures to account for her departure.

They were in plenty of time at the station, and Lord Meredyth and Hilda, at least, were conscious that they were being watched and commented upon by the stray loungers.

Miss Clarke came down to ask for a time-table, and stared at the group with undisguised curiosity.

Then came Mr. Jellett, nervously, furtively; suspiciously surprised when he saw them, and suspiciously perturbed by Lady Florence's bow and greeting.

"I came to send a telegram," he said, "and I am surprised to see you here."

"I am going away," said Lady Florence in a low voice. "It is good-bye, Mr. Jellett, but I hope not forever. Perhaps some day we may meet again under happier circumstances."

"I hope—I hope we will," said Mr. Jellett.

"And in the meantime, I shall never forget all you have

said to me," said Lady Florence sweetly. "May I write to you if I am in trouble or perplexity?"

"Lady Florence," said Meredyth impatiently, "would you mind coming over here, and telling me what you would like to have in the carriage."

"You will wait and see the last of me, won't you?" she said, with a plaintive smile. "I want a lot of things with me, Meredyth. It is perfectly detestable travelling without a maid, and not even a man to look after us. I think you *might* have arranged to come over with us."

Meredyth made no answer.

"There is the train," said Lady Hilda. "I will write to you, Jack."

Then there was a hurried parting, and arrangement of seats. The train did not waste much time at such an unimportant little station as Ballylone.

"Do sit down, Hilda!" said Lady Florence; "you fill up the whole window."

And her last look was for Mr. Jellett.

Then, as Ballylone gradually dwindled away in the distance, she sank back into her seat with a sigh of relief.

"Thank Heaven, that is over," she said; "and now for London, and Life with a capital L!"

CHAPTER LVIII.

"Mein Frühling ging zu wüste,
Ich weiss wohl warum,
Die Lippe die mich küsste,
Ist worden kühl und stumm."

AFTER they were gone, Nicholas strolled back forlornly to the deserted house.

He had nothing to do and nowhere to go to, and he was desolate, something after the fashion of a child's utter, hopeless despair; like a child, Nicholas felt as if he could never be happy again.

He had been to the garden, trying to get some companionship from old Kelly, but old Kelly was even more crusty than usual. The three days' rain had done much harm to his flowers, and he loved his flowers very dearly. He was unhappy, too, but he did not expect any sympathy from Nicholas, who scarcely knew an auricula from a rose.

He was short and snappish in his answers and Nicholas was discouraged.

In the house Mrs. Carroll had taken up the dining-room car-

pet, and was preparing to have it conveyed out of doors and shaken, as if to rid it of all taint of Lady Florence's presence. She did not want Nicholas, who was decidedly in the way.

There were signs of departure in the little hall; ends of cord, discarded labels, and the marks of Carroll's heavy boots upon the carpet.

Nicholas went upstairs; in default of having anywhere else to go.

Their room bore the forlorn look given by a hasty departure—*his* room, he corrected himself in thought.

An old hat, some ribbons, a pair of shoes, various odds and ends which Lady Florence had not thought it worth while to take, lay scattered about in dire confusion. But it was the want of things which struck Nicholas; the spaces left where her numerous toilette odds and ends had been, her jewellery, her ornaments.

Mrs. Carroll's dusting was of a perfunctory kind, and there was a distinct white mark where Lady Florence's dressing-box had stood; there was an empty shelf on the wall, which had held divers little daintily-bound books of devotion, mixed up with some fantastic animals, and a monkey on a stick, which Lady Hilda had given Nicholas once.

He felt oddly injured and annoyed to see that the monkey on the stick, which was not Lady Florence's, was gone too.

Mrs. Carroll had already begun to remove all signs of Lady Florence's presence. She had taken away her pin-cushion and looking-glass, and brought in Nicholas', which had been made over to Lady Hilda.

Nicholas wandered about, touching one thing after another, but there was neither amusement nor occupation here; he brushed his hair, which was already quite smooth, gave his moustache a particular twist, which employed him for quite a minute, tried to fancy he needed a shave, and then went down to Mrs. Carroll again.

She was displaying a most unnatural amount of energy; the furniture was all covered with sheets, and she had already begun to sweep.

He stood in the doorway, with his hands in his pockets—very idle, very much in want of someone to speak to.

But Mrs. Carroll did not want him at all.

"I have made the office as nice as I could for you, sir," she said. "I'll be raising a terrible dust here, and I'll need to have the door shut."

Nicholas submitted to this decision, and wandered off to find a cigar in the office.

Then he heard the sound of wheels, and went out to meet Meredith.

There was the polo-cart, and there was Benedict, displaying

his usual objection to stand still, but even they would soon be gone.

Nicholas went to Benedict's head, and stood beside him, stroking his soft neck.

"Meredyth," he said, "do you think I had better leave Benedict with Carroll to get him ready for sailing, or send him to Derry or Belfast as he is?"

"His action is very good, but he is too hot for harness-work," Lord Meredyth said. "Have you hunted him?"

"Only of an odd time," said Nicholas. "He's afraid of nothing, and when I have once got him out of rushing his fences——" He paused. "I mean, when he has been cured of rushing his fences, I wouldn't ask for a better horse in the field. I was offered seventy for him last autumn, but it wasn't good enough."

"If he is as good as you say, he is worth more," said Lord Meredyth. He knew Nicholas' possessions were always credited with every virtue, and though he admired Benedict, he was not inclined to do any horse-dealing with his brother-in-law.

"I shall be sorry if Benedict gets into the hands of a fellow who can't ride," said Nicholas, half to himself.

"He is hinting to me to take the animal off his hands," thought Meredyth, and he hardened his heart. But in this he wronged Nicholas.

"The polo-cart is in good condition," said Lord Meredyth.

"I only had it built last year," said Nicholas, turning away. "Carroll, take Benedict round. Meredyth, won't you stop here to-night? You will be as well done for as at McCracken's."

"No, thanks," said Meredyth. "I am right enough there, and I will stick to my room."

"You will stay for dinner at least. I don't know what you will get," said Nicholas, looking at his companion and pulling his moustache.

"No, thanks; I have ordered a chop, and to-morrow the Conways have asked me to dine."

"Ah—all right," said Nicholas, but his face fell.

"Do you think you could make me out some idea of what you owe?" said Lord Meredyth. "I will come up early to-morrow, and we must see about making arrangements, and having the things valued. Don't you agree with me that it is as well to get everything over as quickly as possible?"

"Certainly," said Nicholas.

"My idea was that you might be ready to start on Friday from Derry. The Anchor Line boats call at Moville."

"And not go to London at all?" said Nicholas, with a start.

"Is there any particular object in your going to London?"

However, we can settle it all to-morrow. Good-bye for the present."

"Good-bye," said Nicholas.

He did not ask Meredyth to come in; he did not even go through the formality of shaking hands with him. They parted with a mutual careless nod, and Nicholas went into the house and settled himself in his own favourite chair by instinct, while Meredyth walked down the avenue, with the even, purposeful steps of a man who had his place in the world, and who knew how to fill it.

He was willing and ready to give Nicholas all the practical help in his power, but he was not willing to have more personal communication with him than was absolutely necessary. He believed that he could pardon most things, but not this: he could not pardon a man who was not perfectly straight in all his dealings, who had given others a right to call him dishonourable.

Just then, to show Nicholas that he was not absolutely beyond the pale of human sympathy, that he was not unworthy of speech, would have done him more good than all the practical help in the world.

He was in one of his fits of intense self-depreciation. He wanted someone to tell him, or at least to imply, that he was not beyond hope.

What was to become of him? What did it matter what became of him? he said to himself; and yet he felt that it did matter. He was not prepared to think that his life was over. He who felt so strong and young and full of life. His whole pleasure-loving young mind rebelled at the thought of going out alone to this uncongenial life.

If he could only have another chance! There was nobody else to make promises to, so Nicholas made them to himself—gorgeous promises of what his life would have been if there had been another chance for him.

If his father had left behind him money instead of debts, if Nicholas had left cards alone, if he had never met Lady Florence!

He had never had a chance, he told himself, and now everything had gone astray, and there was nobody to care or to pity him—except one person from whom he had no right to expect or ask for sympathy.

No right; it was at least his duty to make no sign, to ask for no pity from her.

Nicholas could stand the loneliness no longer; he could not fight away this dim, half-formed temptation by himself.

He again interrupted Mrs. Carroll in her sweeping.

"Is it—is it near dinner time?" he said. It was the only plea for his presence he could find.

"Not for near an hour yet, sir," said Mrs. Carroll. "I hope to have the room redd up very shortly now."

And then again Nicholas paused and watched her.

"If"—he said, with hesitation—"if you are busy, and the child is in your way, I can look after it without any bother in the study."

"Oh," said Mrs. Carroll, "I am much obliged to you for thinking of it, but I wouldn't trouble you, sir; the child is in the kitchen with my little ones."

It was very kind of him to think of it, but everything was easy to Mrs. Carroll to-day—nothing was a trouble now that Lady Florence was gone.

"It would be no trouble," he persisted, with hesitation.

"I am much obliged to you for thinking of it, sir," said Mrs. Carroll; "but it's no trouble at all, and my little Annie, she nurses it the best you ever saw."

Nicholas persisted no further, and into Mrs. Carroll's head the idea that he might have *wished* for the child never entered.

Everybody had thought that in this baby might have been salvation for the mother if she had been willing, but nobody seemed to realise that it had anything to do with Nicholas. Nobody suspected the queer, unacknowledged fascination it had had for him ever since the day when it had smiled up to him from the dining-room rug.

But the child, too, must be left behind; the child, too, he would probably never see again.

Nicholas went out, and wandered about with his pipe in his mouth.

He did not care to go to the stables, his usual resort, because he did not want to see his polo-cart, his horse, and all the thousand and one things which would soon be his no longer. He did not want to go and lounge away his time among the village men, with whom, in default of other companionship, he had occasionally associated; they must know of all that had happened, and were probably discussing it among themselves, and besides he did not want to meet Meredith.

He wandered about among his little trees—not even they would belong to him soon. From the stile which separated him from the hayfield, he could see the Conways' house, and even Joanna's window.

Quite close to him there was a haystack, just like the one beside which he had first told her that he loved her. She, at least, would be sorry for him if she knew—she only.

Nicholas told himself now that he had loved her all the time. For Lady Florence it had been nothing but an infatuation—a madness such as comes sometimes to the best of men.

But it had lost him Joanna ; it had made it impossible to go to her for the sympathy which she would have given.

"I do love you, I do love you, dear," she had said to him in the lane that last afternoon.

She would not have looked upon him as an outcast ; she would have comforted him, and said kind words to him.

There was only a stile and a meadow between them,—a stile and a meadow,—and the memory of another woman.

CHAPTER LIX.

"A woman stood between his soul and mine,
And waved us off from touching ever more
With those unclean white hands of hers."

"GRANDMOTHER won't be able to come down to dinner to-night," said Polly, with unmistakable satisfaction.

"I thought she wouldn't," said Joanna, looking up from her carving. "It was absurd to think that a cold like that would get well in a day."

"Aren't you bothered about Lord Meredyth ?" said Polly with interest. "What will you do if the fish doesn't come ?"

"Polly, you are the greatest little fusser I ever met," said Joanna, laughing. "If the fish doesn't come, Lord Meredyth will have to try to eat his dinner without it."

Polly flew off in a high state of excitement.

Joanna carved away diligently. She wanted to do as much as she possibly could before she went to London, and every spare moment was engrossed.

The idea of her going, of the possibilities opening before her, was growing upon her day by day. As her father had said, misfortune could not come always, and perhaps now the tide was going to turn, and a second-best something, which might some day be happiness, was coming to her. It was the best possibility which the world held for her now, she knew.

But there was not much time for carving allowed to her that day.

Mrs. Conway's first thought on his arrival had been, as usual, to ask Lord Meredyth to dinner, and when he had accepted, there were many difficulties. Who was to be permitted to meet him, and who was to be omitted without offence ? What was he to be given to eat, and would Roddy McCracken be able to come over and wait ?

Mrs. Conway worried herself and wandered about in draughts till her cold was so much worse that there was no choice for her but to go to bed and give her orders from there.

The whole house was upset. They had a scrambling sort of meal in the drawing-room, in the middle of the day, which Polly thought ecstatically delightful, and people never ceased running about the house, and fussing and sending messages and disagreeing. Mrs. Conway's bell rang at intervals, to remind them of something she was sure everybody else would have forgotten, and in the kitchen the cook was in despair over ordered dishes she had not the least idea how to accomplish.

Joanna did her best to help for a time, and then went back to her carving.

Why would her mother insist on attempting impossibilities, and presenting Lord Meredyth with dishes which necessitated a French cook, and under the present circumstances would be detestable?

Polly rushed about in a state of excitement which would soon have brought her to trouble and confinement in the cellar if her grandmother had been at large.

"Aunt Joanna, there is something *dreadful* wrong with the jelly. Cook wants to know what she is to do—it is all sploshy."

"I haven't the least idea," said Joanna. "I know nothing about jelly; ask your mother to go and see it."

"And I have a letter for you," said Polly; "but you must choose which hand it is in, and I won't give it to you till you guess right."

"A letter?" said Joanna. "Why the post isn't in for a couple of hours."

"It isn't a post letter," said Polly. "It came with a messenger. Now, say right or left, Aunt Joanna."

"Oh, give me the letter, Polly; it may be to say somebody can't come," said Joanna, who was not in the humour for playing with Polly.

"No, no, not till you guess," said Polly, dancing out of her reach.

"I guess right, then, and do give it to me at once like a good child."

"But it isn't right, so there you are, and you must guess again."

"Don't be so tiresome, Polly," said Joanna. "Fancy if it is to say that Lord Meredyth can't come!"

And at this dreadful possibility Polly yielded at once.

"Oh, Aunt Joanna, take it—how dreadful that would be!" she said.

Joanna took the letter, and looked at it rather anxiously. Could Lord Meredyth intend to refuse at the last moment? It was unlike him to be so rude.

Then all at once her face grew white.

There was a pause, during which Polly eyed the unopened letter impatiently.

"What is the matter, Aunt Joanna," she said. "Why don't you open it? I want to hear if he is coming."

"It is not from Lord Meredyth," said Joanna. "Run away, dear, and see about the jelly."

"But you can't know it is not from him till you open it," persisted Polly.

"Run away, now," said Joanna again, and something in her voice made the child obey.

Joanna was alone with her letter.

What did it mean? Why had Nicholas written to her, and what was there left to say between them?

Nothing but good-bye—was that what was in the letter which she held in her hand? She tore it open with trembling fingers and sudden breathlessness.

It was blotted and erased and it was very short and unevenly written.

"DEAR JOANNA:

"I have tried to go away without seeing you, but I can't. I have no right to ask you to speak to me again or to hope you will consent. Will you come to the meadow about nine this evening? [There was a blot here, and a sentence carefully scratched out.] I don't deserve anything, and it doesn't matter what becomes of me, but if you knew how miserable I am— [The rest of the sentence was crossed out, and the letter ended abruptly :] For God's sake come, darling,

"Yours ever,

"NICHOLAS."

"Aunt Joanna, the cream won't whip," said Polly, at the door.

Joanna sprang to her feet and turned the key in the lock.

For a time at least she must be alone, to think, to resolve, to make up her mind.

In her secret heart she knew that it was made up already. At whatever cost, Nicholas' appeal should not be unanswered; but she did not admit to herself that she had decided.

If she went to meet him, it meant grieving her father, who was doing so much for her now; it meant losing his trust once more, and probably for ever; it meant even possibly losing her own good name.

And all the time, Polly kept coming to the door with anxious questions and news of disaster.

"Aunt Joanna, what sash shall I wear?"

"Aunt Joanna, is the silver thing to go in the middle of the table?"

"Aunt Joanna, have you sent Lady Hilda's handkerchiefs to be embroidered?"

"Aunt Joanna, Annie has upset the tray and broken nearly all the claret glasses."

"Aunt Joanna, there are not enough napkins."

There was some sort of answer to be made through the locked door to these laments.

There was the dinner party. If Nicholas had ever heard of it, he had forgotten, but it increased Joanna's difficulties a thousand fold.

Nicholas was unhappy, and he had turned to her for comfort; was she to turn away?

It was time to dress for dinner. Even were the world, at least her world, to come to an end that night, she could not go down to dinner in a serge dress.

There was nothing for her to wear but the blue and silver Lady Hilda had given her, and she wondered if Lord Meredyth would remember it as well as she did.

Sentiment must give way before poverty, and it was the one evening dress which was available; she had always done her best to avoid wearing it, so when her other dresses had reached the stage of being cut down to make frocks for Polly or consigned to the rag-bag, this had remained to her.

So she went downstairs to Lord Meredyth and the Miss Kellys, and Dr. Newland.

It was her part to act hostess, a post which Elizabeth relinquished in view of the carving which would necessarily have fallen to her lot.

Joanna was too doubtful of Roddy's powers to trust to his efforts.

She was glad that this meant she would have Lord Meredyth beside her.

"Marcus asked for you in his last letter," said Miss Kelly. "He wrote from Brindisi."

"I hope he is having a pleasant voyage," said Joanna politely.

How was she to escape from all these people after dinner? Would it be over by nine o'clock? it was after half-past seven now, and there was no sign of Roddy.

Joanna found it very hard to attend to the conversation, and to keep her eyes from the door, and she welcomed the announcement of dinner with an unmistakable sigh of relief.

"You look bothered," said Lord Meredyth, as they went in together. "Nothing has gone wrong about London, I hope?"

"London?" said Joanna vaguely. "Oh, no, it is all right," she added hastily, and then she knew she must be more careful.

Everything went fairly well during dinner. Certainly there was a reminiscence of the stables about Roddy, and there were one or two little *contretemps* about the waiting. Also, the jelly looked odd, and the cream could only be called whipped by a stretch of politeness.

But Joanna talked on valiantly, and if she inwardly fumed at the occasional long pauses between the courses, she succeeded in concealing her impatience.

Polly appeared with dessert, in a high state of excitement and delight, and proceeded to turn for the time being into an *enfant terrible* of the worst kind.

She secured herself a seat next Lord Meredyth, for whom she had developed an immense admiration, and selected matrimony as an agreeable topic.

Lady Hilda West's approaching wedding had implanted the subject firmly in her small head.

"Are you married, Lord Meredyth?" she said.

"Yes, I am married," he admitted.

"Did you have a grand wedding—and cake?" said Polly, with interest. "There is a lovely cake coming in the drawing-room after dinner, and Aunt Joanna has promised that I am to have a bit of it to-morrow for a wedding cake?"

Polly looked rather severely at her aunt as she spoke, having an idea that her consent had been a little forced.

"Why, Polly, are you going to be married to-morrow?" said Lord Meredyth.

"No, not I," said Polly contemptuously. "I am not old enough to be married. But I am going to have a wedding for my kittens, now that they have grown up."

"Oh, they want to be married, do they?"

"I don't know about wanting," said Polly; "but I was talking to Annie, and she says if they aren't married they ought to be."

By which speech she brought confusion not only upon the dinner table but upon the unlucky Annie, who almost dropped the fruit she was handing.

"I don't think I ever want to be married," said Polly, helping herself to strawberries in the pause; "but I should like to have babies. Can people have babies without being married, Lord Meredyth?"

Joanna rose abruptly with a crimson face.

"I have not half finished my strawberries," said Polly, in tones of lamentation, "and, Lord Meredyth, do tell me, can people have babies——"

"You must run away, Polly; it is not proper to stay behind the other ladies," said Lord Meredyth hastily.

It was ten minutes past nine by the hall clock. Joanna was burning with impatience.

The Kelly girls wanted to talk to her, and time was passing.

How she got out of the drawing-room she never knew, but she was afraid she must have managed it very abruptly.

Then she found herself for the moment free—free to draw a cloak over her head, and make her escape in the half light by the other side of the house.

But by no means free from the chance of discovery. There was nothing to prevent her being seen from the house, nothing even to prevent the rest taking it into their heads to stroll out upon such a delicious evening.

And she was nearly half an hour late—would Nicholas have waited ?

CHAPTER LX.

“Still thou art blest compared wi’ me,
The present only toucheth thee.
But, och, I backward cast my e’e on prospects drear !
An’ forward though I canna see, I guess, and fear.”

“JOANNA,” said Nicholas, “I began to think you were not coming, and yet I knew you would.”

“I could not get away sooner,” said Joanna. “We have people to dinner.”

There was no sort of greeting between them ; he did not even take her hand. They stood together in the stubble, half sheltered from the house by a little hay-stack, and at first it seemed as if they had nothing to say to each other.

“I shouldn’t have asked you to come,” said Nicholas. “I have been fighting against it till I was nearly m-mad.”

His voice was very low and uncertain, but nothing touched Joanna as much as the sudden difficulty and stammer in his words. It was not too dusky to see the whiteness of his face, and the strained look of misery in his blue eyes.

She remembered the time when he had been to her so far above other men, when she had given him all her love and faith, fearing nothing and keeping back nothing. Just then, for the first time, perhaps, she understood *all* it had cost her.

Did Nicholas feel as she did that nothing could ever bring them together as they had once been together ?

“Haven’t you anything to say to me, Joanna ?” said Nicholas.

Joanna turned to him with passionate pity.

“My poor boy,” she said softly.

“You know,” said Nicholas, “you must know, that I have never really loved anybody but you. It was a madness which has destroyed both our lives. Joanna, we *would* have been very happy together, wouldn’t we, darling ?”

It was a close, warm evening, and there was a heavy scent of hay in the air.

"Two years ago last Tuesday; did you remember?" said Nicholas, "and just an evening like this. If we could *only* have the time over again!"

There was a long silence. It was not that they had not much to say, but there was not much need to speak.

Joanna leaned up against the haystack, and Nicholas stood a little way off and looked at her.

It was she who spoke first.

"I can't stay long," she said; "and there is so much to say. Nicholas—is it all over—between you and Lady Florence?"

"Yes," said Nicholas. For once in his life he was fighting hard against a temptation—a temptation to take Joanna in his arms whether she would or not, to tell her that there was no choice left to her, that he would not let her desert him.

But she was so completely in his power, so entirely at his mercy. He knew better than she did how much she had risked in coming unhesitatingly to meet him this evening.

"Oh, what a fool I have been, what a fool I have been!" he cried. "Darling, how *can* I say good-bye, and yet, what right have I to say anything else?"

"You are going to America, are you not?" said Joanna, in a low, steady voice.

"Which means in plain English, I am going to the devil," said Nicholas roughly.

She paused, drawing her breath quickly.

"Do you want me to marry you, dear?" she said.

There was a long silence. The hay rustled under Joanna's touch, and through the open drawing-room window a sudden burst of laughter came floating to them.

Joanna neither stirred nor flushed; she had counted the cost and made her offer, and it was for him to decide.

"Oh, don't tempt me!" said Nicholas hoarsely.

"I have thought it over," she said gravely, "ever since I got your letter. If you think I should be a help to you—I couldn't let you go alone."

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" cried Nicholas passionately. "I shouldn't let you spoil your life. I am a selfish brute to let you do it?"

And he came close to her, catching her hand, and trying to take her in his arms. But Joanna drew back with a shiver.

How long was it since he had taken Lady Florence in his arms?

"Don't, please, Nicholas," she said. "We can't be happy like other people—I don't think we shall ever be very happy, dear."

"I shall be happy if I have you," said Nicholas. "Oh, my

darling, my darling, how I love you! I never knew how much I loved you before. My sweetheart, I swear you shall never be sorry. I will work for you—I will work so hard for you."

"Nicholas, it is terrible when you talk like that," said Joanna, with quivering lips. "Can't you see that words like that seem a sin between us—"

"No, I cannot," said Nicholas, "if we are going to be married. Darling, when will you marry me?"

He was a different man now, with a colour in his face, and eyes shining with hope. He had thrown trouble and care behind him, and the pain in Joanna's face was incomprehensible to him.

There was nothing to separate them now, and why would she not be happy?

He had begun to build castles in the air already.

"I will marry you whenever you like," Joanna said; "but don't kiss me, Nicholas; let me go, please."

"But you will meet me here again to-morrow?"

Could he not understand? Had he not the slightest comprehension of the feelings with which she had consented to marry him?

"I shall tell my father to-morrow," said Joanna; "but I can't come to meet you again, Nicholas."

"And your father will never agree," he burst out in sudden alarm.

"I have never failed you, Nicholas, have I? I promise that I will marry you if you wish. If in the morning you think otherwise, dear—"

"Joanna, you know I shall not!"

"But if you do—"

"You must trust me," Nicholas said hotly. "You want me to trust you, and yet you won't believe in me in the least."

Trust him? Joanna knew only too well that try as she might she could trust him never again. But what was the use of hurting him by pointing out the difference?

That was one of the burdens which she must take up; there could never again be perfect confidence between them; there must always be some words left unsaid, and some thoughts unspoken.

Nicholas had almost forgotten Lady Florence; he could not understand, or at least he *would* not understand why things could not at once be as they had been. He rebelled utterly at the idea of not seeing Joanna again till there had been time to arrange their marriage. Why should he not see her? What was the meaning of such an idea?

And when she turned away to go back to the house, he refused to let her leave him without farewell.

"Why won't you let me kiss you, darling? What difference can it possibly make?" he said; and Joanna paused, and thought to herself, what difference did it make, indeed? If he did not understand—if he did not see for himself the reason, why should she pain him?

But when she walked up to the house again, she was not like a girl who had parted from her lover.

What possible good or happiness could come of their marriage now?

And yet how could she stand aside, and see the man to whom she had promised to be faithful, going to destruction, from which there was at least a chance that she might save him? Such as he was, she had once taken him for hers, and though everybody else in the world had deserted him, and given up hope of him, it was not for her to desert him or to give up hope.

She looked at the clock when she came in, and it was only ten.

The men had just come in to the drawing-room, and there was a little buzz of conversation. Elizabeth had not changed her seat, and Miss Kelly was still looking over a book of photographs she had taken up before Joanna went out.

This half hour had meant so little to them, and it had changed her whole life.

Mr. Conway was talking to Lord Meredyth, and looking wonderfully bright and cheerful. How would he look to-morrow when she told him? What would he say—what would everybody say?

"Joanna, where have you been?" said Elizabeth. "Miss Kelly wants to see some of your carvings."

And then Joanna had to bring down some of her latest work, and listen to extremely ignorant admiration, while Lord Meredyth, who had seen them before, talked still to her father.

The Kellys spoke of London, of course, and of Joanna's future life there, and she had to answer and smile and look pleased, and wonder what they would think of her if they knew where she had been that evening.

Lord Meredyth lingered a little behind the rest.

"Miss Conway," he said, "I shall be very much surprised if you don't make a name for yourself. I have not seen many things I like as well as that panel in your hand."

"Will you take it, then—please take it," said Joanna eagerly.

"Oh, thank you, I certainly cannot do that. I should like you to show it to your master, when you have decided upon him."

"But I would much rather you would have it," said Joanna urgently. "I do wish you would take it."

But Lord Meredyth was firm. This was the one he particularly wished Joanna to have with her to show.

"Lord Meredyth has been more than civil," said Mr. Conway in a pleased tone. "He says his wife will call on you, Joanna, when you go to London ; it will be very nice for you to have them."

"When she went to London !"

Joanna collected her carvings in silence.

Should she tell him now ? But to-morrow would be soon enough ; he was so particularly pleased with the world to-night.

"Good-night, father," she said, and then she went to her room with lingering footsteps.

There were so many carvings in all directions, Joanna felt that she could not go to bed with them before her as a reproach.

She gathered them together hastily, thrusting them out of sight in a drawer, leaving her room strangely bare and vacant. There was only left her present work—a large mirror frame which would not fit into the drawer. There were birds upon it, a whole flight of swallows at the top, with one only half finished, as she had left it when Nicholas' letter came. It would never be finished now ; whether she carved ever again or not, she would carve no more at that panel.

She took it up and turned it with its face to the wall.

CHAPTER LXI.

"Time rules us all. And Life indeed is not
The thing we planned it out ere hope was dead,
And then we women cannot choose our lot."

AGAINST her own expectations, Joanna slept soundly all night.

It was settled ; all the uncertainty was over, and the doubts which had perplexed her ever since she had known that Nicholas was to be sent away hopeless and alone.

Whatever their future might be, it was to be spent together, and about this future she did not make herself illusions. It would be a life of constant anxiety and struggle, struggle in which she might not be successful. It might well be that she would not be able to keep Nicholas steady and true to her, and in that case, what would be the end of it all ?

But if the effort was not made, how could she, all her life long, forgive herself ?

Joanna went downstairs to breakfast, grave, but very quiet and resolute.

The sooner that everything was over the better; she was feverishly impatient to get the words to her father said.

Breakfast was not a long meal at Cliff House, and yet to-day it seemed endless.

Mr. Conway, who had no reason for impatience, lingered over his, being in a particularly cheerful frame of mind, and Polly, in the absence of Mrs. Conway's repressive presence, chattered away unceasingly about the excitements of the evening before. Then there were trays to be sent up to Mrs. Conway and Elizabeth, and on the part of the latter, various instructions to be attended to, as to what she considered tempting and desirable.

But to everything an end comes, and there came a time at last when Polly danced away to feed the chickens, with an expressed rejoicing at the absence of prayers, for which Joanna made a faint effort to rebuke her, and Mr. Conway, having glanced at the paper, folded it up and prepared to betake himself to the office.

"Father," said Joanna, "I want to speak to you."

"Well!" said Mr. Conway. "Anything about London? I daresay I may hear to-day; what do you say to your putting on your hat and walking down to the office with me to see if there is a letter. Your carving can wait half an hour, I daresay."

"It is not about London or my carving," said Joanna. "Father, I have to tell you something that I am afraid will vex you very much, and make you very angry with me."

Mr. Conway's face changed; there was no mistaking her earnestness; something serious was certainly wrong.

Joanna would have liked to approach the subject gradually; she had no wish at all to make a dramatic point; she had tried to make up her mind beforehand how her father could best be told what must be told, but now every idea had gone out of her head, everything, except a longing to get it over.

"Father, I have promised to marry Nicholas," she said.

She did not dare to look at Mr. Conway; she sat still in her place at table, nervously crumbling the remains of the bit of toast, which had been her sole breakfast this morning.

Mr. Conway heard her with a dismay which amounted to incredulity.

It was absolutely impossible that Joanna could mean what she said; it was equally impossible that she could jest on such a subject. What could she mean?

"Joanna," he said, "are you mad? What are you talking about?"

"It is true."

"Then I have understood you wrong."

"No, father. I have promised to marry Nicholas."

Something in her tone carried conviction to her father. He looked at her with such horror, such despair in his eyes, that tears sprang into Joanna's.

"Joanna," he said, "if you will tell me at once that you do not mean what you say, I will forgive you the bad taste of your words, I will forgive you even—any fancies you may have had."

"You must believe what I say—oh, do believe it and get it over," cried Joanna with miserable impatience.

"I am to believe what you say," Mr. Conway repeated slowly. "Joanna, I would rather see you dead than married to that man! Have you no pride or self-respect?"

Joanna said nothing.

"Why, the woman for whom he threw you aside has scarcely left him—it is wicked—it is simply indecent! As you are my own child, Joanna, I cannot believe my ears, and this I tell you, that as long as I live, you shall never speak to the scoundrel again."

Joanna was silent still. What was the use of speech?

"Are you willing to be cast off and taken up at that young man's pleasure—to be thrown aside whenever a fresher face takes his fancy, and to rush back to his arms with hot haste when he holds up his finger? You may think I put it coarsely, but no words are coarse enough for the thing you think of doing. There can't be a spark of love left in your heart for such a scoundrel, and if it is a title you want, you will find you are paying rather dearly for it. You never shall marry him—do you hear me; you never shall!"

"I have promised," Joanna said.

"You have promised! And when was this fine promise made? When you met him, still living with another woman—the lover of another woman? God help us all, it is a very black business. It seems to me we have known very little about you, Joanna."

Mr. Conway sat down, and leaned his head on his hand, looking utterly crushed and depressed.

"It was last night," said Joanna.

"And where may you have seen him last night?"

"In the meadow, after dinner."

"Oh, the plot is unfolding," said Mr. Conway, in an altered tone. "So you have been in the habit of meeting him? I congratulate you on the way you have managed it all. I see you looked upon his elopement with Lady Florence Delacque as a mere trifle—nothing that need interfere between you—that was it, wasn't it?" he ended with a short, forced laugh.

"Oh, father!" cried Joanna. "I never met him but once——"

"Don't say any more; I can't believe you," said Mr. Con-

way roughly. "When I think of how you have fooled us all—of how I have gone on planning for you, and you have gone on pretending to enter into my plans, all the time laughing at our simplicity with your lover, I daresay. Oh, yes, you have acted your part very well indeed!"

"But, father——"

"Not another word—I will not listen to another word! I have not patience to speak to you. Leave me, Joanna, at once, and do not let me see you again till you come to tell me that this madness has been given up."

Joanna walked slowly out of the room. If she was not to see him again till this had been given up, she would see him again—never.

She went straight upstairs to her mother; the story had better be told at once, while she was steady and composed, and felt that nothing that anybody could say would make her any the more miserable.

The worst was over. Mrs. Conway's words fell more lightly upon her; the lightest of offences evoked such a storm from her mother, that now, when the matter was so very serious, there was nothing fresh left to be said.

Joanna had heard much what she heard now a hundred times before; she had only to listen to the end in silence, and then go away to her room and lock herself in. But to-day she could not turn to her carving for comfort; she had abandoned it, and the thought of it reproached her as if it had been a living thing.

It was a long, long day. Joanna stayed in her room, and sometimes tried to read and sometimes to work. Elizabeth heard, and came to see her, to dilate upon the wickedness of mankind, to ask her if she was content to take another woman's leavings, to represent to her the scandal she would create and Nicholas' unworthiness.

Then came Polly, desperately agitated and anxious to find out what was the matter and why she was forbidden to go to Aunt Joanna, and afterward Mrs. Conway, with an intercepted letter of Nicholas' in her hand, imploring Joanna to see him in the meadow once again. It was of no use for her to tell her mother that she would not have gone, so she held her peace, and listened to the hard words in silence. It seemed to her just then that she minded nothing.

In the afternoon came Miss Clarke on an errand of kindness; Joanna was meeting Sir Nicholas in the evenings. Did Mrs. Conway know? Miss Clarke had thought it her duty to warn her, lest worse might come of it.

And so Joanna's delinquencies found their way to the neighbourhood.

Mr. Conway said nothing more to her, not even when they

met at high tea that evening. He gave her one quick, enquiring look, then he turned away, and ate what she gave him in gloomy silence.

When the time came to say good-night, she could bear it no longer.

"Father," she said, "won't you think the best you can of me?"

"The best way to make me think you are sorry is to tell me you have given up all idea of this wicked marriage," said Mr. Conway.

"I can't say that," said Joanna, drawing back.

"You may as well give way at first as at last," said Mr. Conway, turning away. "You are my daughter, and I will never permit you to disgrace yourself."

There was nothing more to be said between them just then.

CHAPTER LXII.

"Well, and if none of these good things came,
What did the failure prove?
The man was my whole world, all the same,
With his flowers to praise, or his weeds to blame,
And, either or both, to love."

LORD MEREDYTH appeared at Cliff House next morning before Mr. Conway had gone to his office.

He was very much disturbed.

"Mr. Conway," he said, "I hope there is no truth in what Osborne has been telling me?"

Mr. Conway shook his head with a movement of utter depression.

"You agree with me that it is not to be heard of, that it is absolute lunacy?" he said.

"It is nothing more nor less than the destruction of your daughter's life in a mad effort to save a man who can't be saved, and isn't worth saving," said Meredyth hotly. "I *can't* tell you what I think of Osborne. I spoke to him this morning about his start to-morrow, and then he turned to me coolly and informed me that he could not leave so soon, and gave me his reason—just as if he thought I should be immensely pleased."

Mr. Conway sighed heavily.

"I wish you would speak to Joanna," he said. "Perhaps she would listen to you. I have had a long talk with her since breakfast this morning, but I can do nothing."

"But something must be done," said Lord Meredyth. "She must be prevented from marrying him at any cost. He is not a fit man for her to marry."

It was easy for him to speak trenchantly, Mr. Conway thought, but what was to be done? He knew only too well that an idea which had once entered into Joanna's head was not easily dislodged.

Neither was it likely that Lord Meredyth would prevail when he had himself so utterly failed; but it was not a time to abandon even the faintest hope, and the young man himself seemed so confident.

Indeed to Lord Meredyth it seemed impossible that Joanna would not let herself be moved by the common-sense view of the question.

The girl was no fool, and she was in full possession of her faculties.

"If she will see me, I will do my best," he said. "Miss Conway and I have always been good friends."

And, somewhat to her father's surprise, Joanna consented at once, and even eagerly.

"I should like to see him if I can see him alone," she said; and when she went to him in the drawing-room she greeted him readily and without embarrassment. Just then she had got past embarrassment.

The blinds were all down in the drawing-room, in consideration of the furniture, so it was cold, though there was plenty of sun outside. Joanna drew up a blind, and then Lord Meredyth could see how white her face was, and what dark rings there were under her grave brown eyes.

"I am glad to see you, Lord Meredyth," she said. "I can say to you what I don't like to say to my father."

"But I must warn you, Miss Conway, that I completely agree with him."

"Yes, but this is what I want to say: My father says he will not consent to my marriage with Nicholas. I can't bear to say this to him, but, he can't prevent it. I shall be twenty-two my next birthday."

"If I was your father, I should work heaven and earth to prevent such a marriage," Lord Meredyth said. "Miss Conway, you cannot think it right to throw away your life in this fashion. Nicholas deserves nothing from you."

"I don't know if I can make you understand how I feel," said Joanna.

She had been standing by the window, absently looking out towards the meadow, but now she turned away, and took a chair by the table.

"When I promised to marry Nicholas, I felt from that day as much bound to him as if I had been his wife already. I promised to be true to him for ever—not only so long as he was true to me."

Lord Meredyth did not answer at once ; the words were not his idea of love, and did not please him.

"Joanna," he said, after a pause, "you say you feel as much bound to him as if you were his wife. But, if you had been his wife, and he had—had treated you as he has done—you would not have taken him back. Why should you treat him better than that ?"

"In such things," Joanna answered unhesitatingly, "everybody must think out the right for themselves. Once I believed that that was a thing no man could be forgiven. Lord Meredyth, I can't say what I mean very well, but I know what I mean. Nicholas is mine, my own, to make the best of."

"Do you mean to say that you can care for him after the way he has acted ? Do you mean to say that you can forgive him ? Miss Conway, I must tell you plainly, I do not admire forgiveness carried to this excess ; it is too much like weakness. Do you expect to reform Nicholas ?"

"I am going to try, at least," said Joanna, in a low voice.

"I think you are acting wrongly," said Lord Meredyth. "You have a good prospect before you of making your life useful, and you have no right to ruin it and fling it away for a sentimental idea."

"I don't know whether it is a sentimental idea or not," said Joanna, "but I know that it is too late to say all these things to me. I can't go back and start my life fresh again ; I can't feel like other girls who have had nothing go wrong with them. The harm has been done, and I shall be as happy with Nicholas as I could be anywhere else. He has nobody but me, and I think I shall be able to help him. I shall have such patience with him, you don't know how patient I shall be, Lord Meredyth ! If I failed him now, as long as I lived I should never forgive myself."

Lord Meredyth was touched, but not convinced.

"Joanna," he said, "if Nicholas were like fifty young men I know, perhaps I should have no right to say any more. But he is worse than unsteady. I must speak out for this once, though I don't like to do it. He doesn't always run straight. He has got into very disgraceful trouble over cards and racing. He is not a fit man for a good girl to marry."

Joanna bent her head in a sudden agony of humiliation, but she answered steadily enough, though her voice was very low.

"He needs me all the more. Nothing can come between us now. It has gone beyond that."

"Then I have only this to say to you, and you must forgive me for speaking very plainly. Whatever right you may have to destroy your own life, there are other lives that you have no right to injure. You may have children."

Joanna did not flush.

"I am not a child, Lord Meredyth," she said; "and I have thought of that. I thought of everything till I was nearly mad, before I said I would marry Nicholas. I don't say that I am right, or that a better girl in my place would not act differently, but I am quite sure that I can do nothing else. Please, Lord Meredyth, will you believe that nothing you or anybody else can say will change me, and will you make my father believe it too?"

"Then you are giving up your carving and all your hopes and ambitions? Do you know what a terribly hard life you are choosing? Do you realise it?"

"I am strong," said Joanna. "Will you tell Nicholas that he can make what arrangements he likes; that I will marry him when and where he pleases, but that till then I can't see him—I can't, he must not ask me!"

Lord Meredyth had not said one-half of the things he had wished to say, but he had said enough to see that speech was of no use.

"Will nothing I can say or do have any effect?" he said. "Will nothing that I can tell you of Nicholas' unfitness be of any use?"

"Nothing," said Joanna, with the faintest of smiles. "I am very obstinate when I have made up my mind. Will you try and make the best of it to my father? It is so hard for him, and he has been so very good to me. I think he had as much hope about London as I had."

Which was Joanna's only approach to a spoken regret for the life she was giving up.

CHAPTER LXIII.

"Being observed,
When observation is not sympathy,
Is just being tortured. If she said a word,
A "Thank you," or an "If it please you, dear,"
She meant a commination, or, at best,
An exorcism against the devildom
Which plainly held me. So with all the house."

THERE was nothing to be done—absolutely nothing.

Having failed with Joanna, Meredyth turned to Nicholas, but he was as unsuccessful here. He could not bring himself to bribe his brother-in-law with offers and promises, and if he had done so, it would have been of no use. Nicholas was hotly impatient to be married to Joanna; he was angry because she steadily refused to see him, but this only made

him the more eager. The episode of Lady Florence had almost faded out of his memory, and his good spirits had returned. He had persuaded himself into a very rosy view of the position ; he had been a fool certainly, and he had treated Joanna very badly, but now he was making her the only possible reparation in his power, and when they were married it would be all right.

He had already fully persuaded himself that his late conduct to her had not been prompted by selfishness, but by a noble desire for her good.

He had not the smallest doubt that they would be very happy. Ranch life would just suit Joanna—she could have her bees and her chickens and her potato fields.

He had conveniently forgotten that with her, bees, chickens, and farming had been as means to an end, and not as the end itself.

So Nicholas at least was happy, but with Joanna it was different.

Everybody was against her—everybody, except perhaps Polly, who did not understand.

Somehow, perhaps through Miss Clarke, the news spread in the village, and caused an immense scandal there.

Mrs. Moreland and Miss Chester both came up to represent their view of the case to Joanna, and were admitted to private interviews by Mrs. Conway, with a view to leaving no stone unturned.

Mrs. Moreland said she had known Joanna from infancy, and had never thought she would be willing to bring down the gray hairs of her father and mother with sorrow to the grave. Had she forgotten the seventh commandment, and was she willing to entrust her future life to one who had wilfully broken it ? Had she also forgotten the fifth ?

Miss Chester said she could not believe what she had heard. Did not Joanna know that everybody said she was making very little of herself ? Sir Nicholas was a handsome fellow, but a girl ought to respect herself, and people were inclined to say that Joanna had thrown herself at the young man's head again, because he was a baronet and good-looking.

This, from Miss Chester, who in her numerous flirtations was popularly reported to go more than half way, had an extra bitterness.

But outsiders' interference was a slight trouble when compared to the daily misery of facing her own family.

She had not even her carving to comfort her now, for she could not bear to touch it, could not bear even to think of it.

Mrs. Conway talked to her constantly, and when she did not talk to her she talked at her ; her father said very little, but he looked at her sometimes with a trouble in his eyes,

which was worse to her than anything else. Polly followed her about, studying her anxiously, noting the strain in the household, and that Joanna carved no more, but asking no questions.

Even Elizabeth aroused herself from a complication of diseases to express her opinion to her sister.

It was on Saturday evening, when Joanna had discovered the discomfort of the drawing-room to be more than she could bear, and had escaped up to her room to sit by her window with a book on her knee. What a long, long time it was since Wednesday, and for how much longer would these dreary, purposeless days go on?

Everything seemed to have come to a deadlock, and it was becoming more and more evident to Joanna that if she intended to marry Nicholas she must give up all hope of even the most grudging consent from her people, and either see him or commission him to take matters into his own hands.

Among these thoughts came Elizabeth, with her soft voice and her pretty, peevish face.

"Joanna," she said, "I have come to see what I can do."

"Oh, Elizabeth," Joanna said snappishly, "if I could only convince you all that you can do nothing—nothing but make me miserable!"

Mrs. Morris drew up another chair to the window, and seated herself with deliberation.

"Do you think we can all stand aside and see this madness go on?" she said. "You see how my life has been wrecked. Joanna, you are a child—a baby—you don't see what you are doing."

"I think I do," said Joanna. "You may say, Elizabeth, that I did not know what I was doing when I first agreed to marry Nicholas two years ago. That is quite true—I did not. But what has happened to me can't happen to a girl and leave her a child still. My eyes were *torn* open for me."

"And yet you will take no warning?" said Elizabeth plaintively. "You imagine that you will be able to keep that man true to you when you are married, when you could not keep him true before?"

"I think I shall be able to keep him true," said Joanna.

"I understood nothing before and I feared nothing."

"That is all very well," said Elizabeth. "You will think all is going well, and some day you will find out—and then you will come home as I came——"

Joanna shook her head to herself; she would never come home as her sister had done.

"But, after all, you can forgive what I could never bring myself to forgive," Elizabeth added, shrugging her shoulders.

"Do you understand this, Joanna—Sir Nicholas Osborne is a

passionate man and a man who is not likely to let anything stand between him and what he wishes——”

“It is much better not to say things that cannot be forgotten, Elizabeth,” said Joanna, “as whatever Nicholas may be, I am going to marry him.”

“If you would only wait a little,” said Elizabeth; “you would forget it all in a few years; you would go to London, the Meredyths would be sure to take you up, and you would probably end by marrying a man in as good a position as Sir Nicholas, or better.”

Then Joanna sprang up from her seat with nervous impatience.

“Oh, I can’t stand any more!” she cried. “Elizabeth, I have talked and argued till I am nearly out of my senses. Do, do please, go away and give me up!”

And Elizabeth indignantly went.

Forget all about it in a few years—would that undo it all and make everything as if it had never happened? Could those two years be washed away out of her life as if they had never been, and leave her cheek free for another man’s kisses, her ears to listen to the same words from another man? Nicholas absolutely blotted out of her life, and another man with a right to her thoughts and love!

Elizabeth had said she might marry somebody else.

She might pick up her life, and piece it together as well as she could, and then give it to somebody else—some good man, perhaps, who would deserve all love and trust.

But Joanna knew that this was the worst thing which had happened to her—as long as she lived she could never trust any man again—not though she tried her hardest, not though her mind convinced her that her trust was deserved, not though she struggled with her whole strength to gain it.

If there was to be any marriage in her life, it was better then that she should marry Nicholas, with whom she need never reproach herself for this hidden want of faith.

Was it a sacrifice to give up the life she had planned out for herself, for his sake? Joanna did not know, and she had never asked herself the question clearly.

That evening she wrote a short note to Lord Meredyth asking him to come over to see her at church time next day; it was the only time when she could be sure of seeing him alone.

It was in all probability her last Sunday at home, and she got up in the morning with this knowledge lying like a heavy weight on her mind.

For the last time there were her collect and gospel to be learned.

They were not so difficult now as they had been in past years, for with each there was a lingering memory of having

been learned many times before; but this Sunday she wished to have them specially perfect and without mistakes.

Though she succeeded, her mother heard them in silence, and Joanna wondered did she, too, think and remember that never, never again would Joanna come and stand before her to repeat her lesson as she had done ever since she was able to stand.

Nobody asked Joanna if she was going to church; she fastened Polly's jacket and put a pin in Elizabeth's placket hole by way of security, and then she saw them all start, with an intense desire to tell Mrs. Conway that her dress was crooked.

After which she wandered up and down the avenue waiting for Lord Meredyth.

He came very soon, in knickerbockers and gaiters, which did not look at all like Sunday, and he greeted her kindly, but without his usual smile.

They went to the garden, to Joanna's favourite seat by her beehives, where Lord Meredyth had never been before.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "This seat was painted the other day—I wonder is it dry."

"It is all right—which end will you have? I should have come this afternoon, at any rate, to say good-bye, as I must go back to London to-morrow."

"To-morrow—oh!" said Joanna, with a cry of dismay.

"Is there anything you want me to do?" Lord Meredyth said. "I am afraid I must absolutely be in London on Tuesday, but——"

"Oh, it is nothing," Joanna said. "It was only a fancy—I thought perhaps you might have gone to Belfast with me. It seems—but it was only a fancy."

"To Belfast?"

"We are to be married there some day this week. We thought of Derry at first, but it is too near."

"And you have settled all this?"

"Yes, we have written to each other. Don't you agree that the sooner it is over the better for everybody? Only a special license costs—I mean how long does it take to arrange about that kind of marriage?"

Joanna had checked herself; it would not do to express to Lord Meredyth her doubts of Nicholas' right to expend money in this way.

He looked at her. She was so young and so forlorn as she sat there beside him, and yet so resolute, for all the tired lines about her eyes.

"Look here, Joanna," he said, "if this marriage must take place, at least why not wait for a year? Let Nicholas go out, and see what the place is like, and make a home for you, and then——"

Joanna turned her steady brown eyes on his face.

"If I were to put off my going for a year," she said, "you know and I know that I should probably go—never."

Then for the first time Meredyth felt certain that she knew what she was about—she was making for herself no illusion about Nicholas.

"*I must go out with him now,*" Joanna went on, "and, Lord Meredyth, I have not spoken of it to Nicholas yet, but when we have got a home, in a year or two, we will send for the child—Nicholas' child."

Lord Meredyth did not answer at once; was it necessary that this burden, too, should be placed on Joanna's shoulders?

"Do you think," she said anxiously, "that I should take it at once? I do not feel as if I *could*, and while it is so little, it will be happy anywhere, won't it?"

"You *poor* child!" Lord Meredyth said. "Look here, Joanna, I see that nothing will make you change your mind, so let us make the best of a bad business. Let me take you back to London with me, to-morrow, and you can be married from our house. It will be best—it will be much the best thing to do."

"Oh," cried Joanna, with tears in her eyes, "how good you are—how very good you are!"

Not even in her thoughts did she form the comparison to herself, but it was vaguely there all the same—what a difference there was! How undoubtingly the woman who had married Lord Meredyth might look to him for help.

"I will speak to your father," he said. "I am sure, with me, he will see it is the only thing to be done. Can you be ready to start to-morrow? I would give you more time if I could."

"Oh, yes, I can be ready," said Joanna.

There was only one drawback, and it seemed such an inadequate reason to give—want of clothes.

"Well, then, we won't say another word on the subject at present," said Lord Meredyth. "Let us go in, and find a glass of wine for you. You look to me as if you needed it badly."

"But all the wine is locked up," said Joanna. "And father has taken the keys to church with him."

"Then let us go for a walk by the river," said Lord Meredyth. "But of Sir Nicholas and his affairs there shall not be another word this morning."

CHAPTER LXIV.

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange,
And be all to me?"

THE last day—the very last morning.

Everything had been decided in such a hurry, and there was so much to be done that Joanna had not much time for thought.

Nobody either helped or hindered her in any way, and Mrs. Conway contented herself with simply ignoring the fact of her approaching departure.

Joanna had few clothes, and fewer boxes; this time she could not take those belonging to the rest of her family.

There was a yellow tin box, which, much against her will, had been purchased for her to take to school, but which she could not bear to use now; it seemed to her as if it would add something comic to the whole matter.

With Annie's help she unearthed a trunk and a portmanteau, the first belonging to her, and the second to nobody in particular.

Polly followed her about with an armful of kittens, blind, helpless little morsels of fur, legitimised by her efforts only twenty-four hours before their appearance in the world.

Rumours of contemplated murder had reached Polly's ears, and she was doing her best to safeguard the lives of her treasures. But the mother, who did not know her motives, was far from pleased by her attention, and followed her about complainingly, getting into everybody's way, and having various narrow escapes as the trunks bumped down the attic stairs.

Joanna packed after a desultory fashion all morning. There was so much to be done and to be thought of.

For a long time she meditated over her carving; then she decided to take it; some of it, at least, might be sold, and if she had any time to spare on this indefinite future ranch, perhaps she might be able to make a little money in this way.

Only it took a great deal of room in her trunk, and it was very heavy.

She could not bring herself to go down to the village to say good-bye, but everybody had somehow or other found out she was going, and a good many people came up.

Among others, Mrs. McCracken, who left her shop to take care of itself, and came up to weep and lament over her. Where was she going to? When would she come back? Questions to which Joanna could return no definite reply. Only her own people said nothing.

When everything was put together, and the portmanteau, having been closed with much difficulty, was fastened by a rope, in default of a lock, she went her farewell round out of doors.

Polly entreated to come, too.

"Let me come, Aunt Joanna," she said. "I want to learn what I am to do when you are away."

"Well, put down the kittens, then," Joanna said. "Not on my bed—how can you, Polly!"

"But you won't be sleeping in it to-night," said Polly, with wide open eyes. "So, what does it matter?"

"You are quite right," said Joanna, turning away.

It was nearly time to start when they had made the round of the potatoes, the hay, the bees, and the chickens.

Joanna went upstairs to put on her hat, and was surprised to find that her hands were trembling. She did not feel anything particular, only a dull determination to go through with it to the end.

"Grandfather has sent for you," said Polly. "He is in the dining-room."

"Very well," said Joanna composedly; "I am going."

"I suppose I mustn't come?" said Polly.

Joanna shook her head.

There were very few minutes left, and she had just been making up her mind to go and look for her father herself.

"Come in and shut the door for a minute or two," he said.

He was looking very troubled and worried. He had been so proud and fond of Joanna, and she had so entirely disappointed him. He felt, too, what a difference, what a blank her absence would leave in the house.

"Have you got a purse?" he said practically. "Here are five pounds which you will need for your journey and small expenses, and here is a cheque for a couple of hundred. Make it go as far as you can. When I hear, later on, how matters are, I will see what I can manage to allow you yearly."

"Thank you," said Joanna, in a low voice. "I am disobeying you, father, and I don't deserve any help."

"Of course, I must help you as far as I can," said Mr. Conway. "And if you are in any trouble or difficulty, you must write to me at once. I want to hear the truth about your life. Do you understand, Joanna?"

"Yes, father," said Joanna.

"And now, my child, good-bye, and God bless you," said Mr. Conway, drawing her to him.

In that last moment it was all she could do not to cling to him and tell him she could not go—she could not bear to go.

Cliff House seemed so safe and so homelike, and all the little rubs and troubles so very small and petty.

She was going away—alone—with nobody but herself to depend on for the rest of her life.

But it was too late to draw back now; even as she spoke to her father she could hear the wheels of the pony-cart rattling on the gravel in front of the hall door.

In the hall Mrs. Conway kissed Joanna coldly, but there were tears in her eyes, which made up for it. She considered it her duty to yield to no softness with the daughter who was disobeying her.

Elizabeth kissed her affectionately enough, but it was Polly who clung to her in a passion of grief, which went very near to upsetting her composure.

Richard O'Brien's successor was to drive her to the station; he looked after the pony, and made himself generally useful about the place.

He had once been in Joanna's Sunday-school class, and he, too, was sorry she was going.

Lord Meredyth was at the station already. He came out to meet her and have her boxes carried in, and he found her a seat on the platform and was very kind to her.

There was not even Mr. Jellett to see Joanna off, on this, her second journey in Lord Meredyth's company.

It was the first time she had left Ballylone since the day, two years ago, when she and Nicholas had started off gaily for Merevale.

In those days Joanna had not lacked courage to face the unknown; she had been full of joy and excitement, and had left her home behind her with a light heart.

Now, it was very different indeed.

"Here comes the train," said Lord Meredyth. "I have got your ticket, Miss Conway. We must try and get a carriage to ourselves."

Which they did without difficulty; there were not many first-class passengers about Ballylone.

There was a whistle, a slamming of doors, and they were off. Joanna leaned out of the window, watching the familiar little station till it could be seen no longer. Every field she passed she knew well; there was a hedge where a lost swarm of bees had been discovered; a bog-hole where she had once fallen in and been dragged out dirty and dripping; the path across the fields which, of all others, she and Nicholas had liked the best. Everything was familiar, everything had some remembrance connected with it, and it was very, very possible that she would never see Ballylone again.

CHAPTER LXV.

“Loke who that is most virtuous always,
Prive and apert and most entendeth ay,
To do the gentle dedes that he can,
And take him for the greatest gentleman.”

“HERE we are,” said Lord Meredyth; “this is Eaton Square.”

“Oh,” said Joanna, “I was beginning to feel as if we were going to drive on forever!”

She was very tired, and far more nervous and shy in view of this second meeting with Lady Meredyth than she had been before the first.

Her box and that shabby portmanteau looked so out of place in front of the Meredyth carriage, which had come to meet them at the station. Their house looked so big and impressive.

She recognised the footman who opened the door for them; on her first arrival at Merevale he had also been there.

Vaguely it hurt her that he made no sign of recognition. It was undeniable that he must see a great many ladies, and that she did not see many footmen; but still, had she known it, he not only recognised her, but was entirely conversant with her history.

“Is her ladyship at home?” said Lord Meredyth.

The butler had made haste to come to do his master honour.

“No, my lord,” he said; “her ladyship told me to say that she would return for afternoon tea.”

“And Lady Hilda West?”

“Lady Hilda left for Scotland two days ago, my lord.”

Joanna was disappointed; she had hoped that Lady Hilda would have been at Eaton Square still, and had felt that a talk with her would have done her a great deal of good.

“As everybody seems to be out,” said Lord Meredyth, “shall we both freshen ourselves up a bit, and be ready to have tea comfortably?”

“I think that would be a capital plan,” said Joanna, with resolute cheerfulness.

Somewhat this time everything impressed her in a quite new way; the big hall, the wide, handsome staircase, the neat, grave maid who led her to her room. It had all amused and excited her before, but never depressed her. Was she by chance becoming snobbish? After all what difference did riches and big rooms and luxury really make? But Joanna knew they did make a difference.

It gave her one more excuse for Nicholas. She herself had

been on one side, out of her element, with her rusticity and her home-made frocks, and Lady Florence on the other, with every help that dress and experience could give, in a circle to which she had been accustomed all her life long, and where she was admired by all.

She could realise now how different she had seemed to Nicholas as Joauna at Ballylone and Joanna at Merevale.

With the courage of ignorance she had never feared Lady Florence, had never even thought any precautions necessary. She had made no allowance whatever for outside influences, and was it any wonder that Nicholas had lost his head? She could not have believed in any man now with such serenity, with such absolute unconsciousness of danger.

Joanua changed into the gray dress which was still her best, and let the maid lay out the blue and silver on her bed.

She did not go down till a message came to tell her that tea was ready, and even then it was with somewhat unwilling steps.

But Lady Meredyth had not as yet come in, and there was only Meredyth himself waiting for her.

He had more than plenty of business ready for his return, and if he had intended to be idle, he could have spent the afternoon very comfortably at his club, but he had suspected that Joanna would be rather lonely and forlorn.

She was grateful to him, and very glad to have him for a support.

They found themselves comfortable armchairs in a corner of the reading-room, which Lord Meredyth had selected for tea, because it was small and had an air of cosiness, and being both chilly people, they had a fire lighted, July though it was.

Presently Lady Meredyth came in, rustling in her silk petticoat, in elaborate attire which Joanna thought suited her a great deal better than the shirts and serge skirts of Merevale.

She had not expected an effusive greeting from her hostess; she knew her too well. Consequently she was not disappointed.

"How do you do, Miss Conway? not tired after your journey, I hope? Well, Meredyth, glad you're back; you don't know Captain Maurice, I think? Great Scott, this room is like a furnace!"

After which she devoted herself to the two men who had followed her in. One of them had apparently come under pressure, refused to sit down, and was barely civil to Lady Meredyth, signs by which Joanna concluded that he was beginning to tire of following in her train, as somehow or other all her protégés did, sooner or later. The other declined tea altogether, and was supplied with something more stimulating.

But both of them stared at Joanna; they knew all about her and were curious, and they had both known Osborne.

"Captain Maurice, must you really go?" said Lady Meredyth. "Wait for a few minutes and we will have some fresh tea; this is half cold."

"Thanks, I must positively go," said Captain Maurice, looking bored. "I am late for an appointment already."

"Well, we will meet to-night at Lady Gower's. Do you object to my having an appointment with Captain Maurice, Meredyth?" Lady Meredyth ended, with rather forced playfulness.

But the only person who objected to the appointment was Captain Maurice himself.

After he had left, other people who were staying in the house began to drop in, and one or two of them Joanna had met at Merevale.

She escaped as soon as she could, but at dinner she had to face them all; she would have liked to remain in her room even then, but to say so, would, she thought, have sounded like affectation.

Lady Meredyth did speak to her once, just as she was starting upon her round of evening festivities.

"Miss Conway," she said, "I suppose you will want some dresses?"

"Yes," said Joanna, "I shall have to get something."

"You can have a carriage to-morrow morning, if you like, and I will send my maid to help you."

"Oh, thank you," said Joanna.

"If you want any help outside that, of course I shall be glad to do what I can for you," Lady Meredyth ended.

She was not ill-natured, but simply self-engrossed.

Meredyth brought her home from Lady Gower's, and in the carriage he spoke to her about Nicholas and Joanna.

"It is a crazy marriage," Lady Meredyth said. "If Nick had kept quiet he might have been more or less white-washed in a year or two; but, of course, it is his own business."

"It is a crazy marriage for Miss Conway, certainly," said Lord Meredyth gravely.

"Florence Delacque won't be best pleased when she hears about it."

"She is in France, isn't she?"

"She is in France, right enough, duennaed by an old cousin or aunt or something, by your orders, according to Hilda. I wonder how long she will stand it!"

"It was the only thing to be done," said Lord Meredyth. "Shall I draw up the window—that cloak of yours is very thin."

"Thanks, no; I am not such a chilly person as you are."

Florence has written to me, you know, Jack, complaining about it all. What is more, she wrote to Mr. Delacque, informing him that it was his duty to give her a yearly allowance. He was furious and sent the letter to Hilda, saying he wished for no further communication with the family."

"She has neither conscience nor shame," said Lord Meredyth.

Judith laughed: "Well, I promise you that under the same circumstances I won't write to you for help, Meredyth," she said.

"Don't speak like that, child," he said abruptly.

Judith looked at him and was silent. She had a queer respect and affection somewhere in her silly heart for her husband. He had been in love with her once, and though he was not in love with her any longer, though in London and at Merevale they went their own ways and saw very little of each other, still he was invariably kind to her when they did meet. The rubs and disagreements of their first years of marriage had settled into a friendly indifference, but there was no likelihood that she would ever wish to follow Lady Florence's example.

She went back to the subject of Nicholas.

"But you intend Nicholas to rough it, don't you?" she said. "From your account of the ranch, I don't see where a Lady Osborne is to come in, even a little chit like that."

"I *did* intend him to rough it," Meredyth answered, "and to a certain extent he must still. But I can't send a lady out in the way I proposed to send him. I shall have to make a difference of course, though it is more than he deserves. Poor girl! in any case she will have plenty to put up with."

"Poor girl, indeed!" said Lady Meredyth, "I should say she is a young woman who can conveniently shut her eyes to a good deal with a view to becoming Lady Osborne——"

"A high honour, indeed!" said Meredyth, with something approaching a sneer.

CHAPTER LXVI.

"Woo'd and married and a',
 Married and woo'd and a'!
 And was she sae very weel off,
 That was woo'd and married and a'?"

So, as all things come in time, it happened that Joanna woke up one damp morning to find it was her wedding-day.

It was not a cheerful day by any means; out of her window there was nothing to be seen but rain, falling in a thick drizzling mist.

Her boxes were packed already; there only remained outside her finished carvings, which Lord Meredyth had promised to try and dispose of for her.

In a few hours now it would all be finally settled, so that nobody could ever come between them any more; they would have to help each other through the rest of their lives as best they could.

What would be the end of it all? Joanna wondered.

In her vague thoughts of what her wedding-day should be like, it had never been like this. She felt nothing just then but complete over-mastering terror; terror lest in this new life Nicholas should fail her, terror of what the next few hours would bring her.

It was a hasty morning, and for herself Joanna wished for no delay.

The marriage was to be at ten o'clock, to leave them time to reach the docks before their ship sailed.

Lord Meredyth was kind but grave, Lady Meredyth was disturbed by her effort at early rising, and determined to have Joanna in good time. She had a haunting fear that the boat might be missed, and the newly married couple deposited upon her hands for a week.

"Now, Joanna," said Lord Meredyth, "if you are ready, I think we ought to start."

"I am ready," said Joanna.

There was a desperate longing in her mind to rush upstairs, lock herself in her room, and declare that nothing would persuade her to be married that day, but this project was plainly unadvisable.

She had to recollect, too, that this day, though all important to her, was only like other days to the rest.

In the carriage she heard Lady Meredyth say in an undertone to her husband: "What time will this business be over, do you think? I have an appointment."

After all, why should not Lady Meredyth think of her appointment? Joanna was not much more than a stranger to her, and Nicholas had forfeited all right to be considered.

Even Lord Meredyth—kind as he was, this could be nothing but an episode to him.

Joanna longed for somebody from *home*, somebody who was not only kind to her, but who belonged to her, and to whose kindness she had a right.

They were to be married in a church near Regent Street, which was not fashionable, and was fairly convenient. Joanna's boxes were to be transferred to Nicholas' carriage, and the one they were in now was to take Lady Meredyth to her appointment.

It was very wet getting out at the church door; the foot-

man had to hold an umbrella over Lady Meredyth and Joanna in turn.

There were only a few stray people in church, and it was such a dark day that the clergyman had had a lamp lighted for his benefit.

Joanna became seized with a sudden panic ; suppose Nicholas had not come ? Suppose anything had happened to prevent him—or had he changed his mind ?

No, there he was waiting for them, looking much more nervous than she did. Joanna was seized with a sudden impulse to laugh ; he had forgotten to turn down his trowsers. It looked so absurd to see him, but there was no doubt about it, she must not laugh—what would everybody think !

“The voice that breathed o’er Eden——”

With the organ her impulse toward laughter passed away.

“Come,” said Lord Meredyth.

“I don’t call that a pretty girl,” said one spectator to another.

“No, the man is handsome; she has got the best of the bargain,” said another.

Nicholas was desperately nervous. All through the Exhortation Joanna could see his hands shaking.

It never stopped raining, pattering against the windows.

“I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of ye know of any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured, that so many are coupled together otherwise than God’s word doth allow are not joined together by God ; neither is their matrimony lawful.”

What were they doing ? Did God allow them to be joined together while another woman lived, and a child which was his and hers ?

Should not the memory of this woman have held them apart forever ? Joanna pressed her lips together to keep back a cry. Would Lady Florence herself appear to part them ?

But the clergyman went on to the next part of the service with scarcely a pause ; he did not expect any answer ; he only thought the bride looked very white and miserable, and looking at Nicholas’ handsome face, he wondered.

Nobody came between the two to separate them, and it was all over very soon. Whether it was a sin or a thing well done, nothing could undo it now.

They said good-bye to Lord and Lady Meredyth in the vestry.

"Good-bye," said Lady Meredyth; "I wish you all kinds of good fortune, and I hope you will have pleasant passage."

After which she kissed Joanna, and held up her cheek to Nicholas, a little moved and touched by the whole affair.

"Good-bye, Osborne," said Meredyth, shaking his hand. "You are a lucky man at last."

There were many things he could have said, but he did not want to preach to Nicholas, especially just then.

Nicholas himself, with his handsome face bright, said: "I owe you a lot, Meredyth, and I am really going to turn to and make something of my life now. With God's help, Joanna shall never regret to-day."

Then Lord Meredyth said good-bye to Joanna, simply good-bye, without any words added.

The few spectators had gone when they walked through the church again, and they had it to themselves.

"This is our carriage, Joanna," said Nicholas, and Lady Meredyth said good-bye over again, this time a little absently, for she had begun to think of her appointment.

"To the Albert Docks," said Nicholas; then he turned to Joanna.

"Darling, darling," he said, "you are mine at last."

He was very much agitated still, but for her the agitation was over.

"I will take such care of you, my sweetheart—my *wife*," he said. "Darling, you may trust me. I will make myself a different man for your sake, believe me, I will."

"Oh, I *will* believe you—I *must* believe you!" Joanna cried.

"And you are glad to be my wife? Dearest, you used always to be so cheery, and I want you to look happy. We are going to forget everything, darling, except each other, and we are going to be very happy."

"We are going to be very happy," repeated Joanna. "Dear, will you have patience with me just for to-day? To-morrow I will be as cheery as I used to be."

This ends, as it should end, with the ringing of marriage bells.

And most undoubtedly the ringing of marriage bells is understood to precede perfect happiness in this best of all possible worlds.

